UNIT 1 THE NOVEL IN ITS CONTEXT

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to provide a general introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* by looking at the immediate social and cultural environment in which it is written and situated, and by relating the text to the eighteenth century tradition of realistic fiction.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A study of the intellectual and historical context as part of the study of a literary work might be undertaken with two main aims . The **first** of these is to try and recover some of the thought-patterns and influences that the author comes in contact with, whether or not consciously. These need not necessarily be seen only as forming a 'background' against which the text is written, but as playing into the text and constituting it along with other texts, not all of them fictional ones. Intertextuality is thus one of the areas such a study is interested in. The **second** is a consequence of the first, and involves looking at the implications of authorial choices of form, genre and language in relation to the influences mentioned above.

1.2 THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN EUROPE

The eighteenth century is usually spoken of as a period of supposed stability in Europe, but can in fact be seen as one of the most turbulent periods in European history, with considerable social unrest as one of its features. There were important and widespread changes in the social and political consciousness of Europe at this time, with peasants beginning to move from rural estates to the towns, increased trade, communication and travel as well as the economic gains and contact with other cultures brought about by imperialism.

This is also a period associated with revolution. The fast-growing middle classes resented having to pay taxes to support an expensive aristocracy which contributed little economically to society (except in the form of patronage of the arts) but retained social privilege and political power. The most extreme form taken by this

dissatisfaction was of course the Revolution in France, but its impact was much wider, and was felt all over Europe.

The French Revolution began in 1789, on July 14 of which year the Bastille was stormed, and the king (Louis XVI) was removed from the court at Versailles. The Revolution then moved through several, increasingly radical phases, beginning with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, going on to the eventual abolition of the monarchy and the execution of the king, followed by the Reign of Terror (1793-1793), the establishment of a new government called the Directory and the eventual rise of Napoleon Bonaparte who became Emperor in 1804. The French Revolution greatly influenced British politics and philosophy at the time, but there was a gradual shift away from the early enthusiasm with which English radicals like Paine and Godwin had greeted it — Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is proof of this. Paine replied to this work with *The Rights of Man* (1791) thus setting off a long-lasting debate between conservative and radical thinkers. Wordsworth and Coleridge, interestingly were both to eventually change their minds about the French Revolution, as they were forced to acknowledge that, far from its professed aims of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, it had come to mean anarchy and cruelty.

1.2.1 Conditions in England

Class divisions continued to be fairly rigid in England at least, though Jane Austen does in her novels explore the beginnings of class mobility. This period has been considered the most violent in English history since the Civil War, and it also witnessed a repression of the citizen's rights in the form of restrictions on the freedom of speech and assembly, and a suspension of *habeas corpus*. In addition, survival was difficult for the vast majority of the population, and the extremes of wealth and poverty coexisted in close proximity, a situation more or less guaranteed to give rise to dissatisfactions. A fast-growing population which began to be concentrated in the new industrial areas whose development went along with the gradual enclosing of land to provide larger arable holdings, something Jane Austen must have seen at close quarters, since she lived in Hampshire and Kent, both areas of agricultural poverty. These enclosures, in turn, gave rise to a greater accumulation of the poor in urban areas. Mortality rates were high in the congested cites. Dr. Johnson once estimated that at least a thousand persons died each year in London from hunger and related diseases, and was told that this was a considerable underestimation. Though social reform was beginning to be an issue among many, it was not yet strong enough to overcome the more common attitude of a strong fear of popular unrest. This was also a period that saw the emergence of modern capitalism in the shift from a mainly agrarian economy to an increasingly industialized one centered upon the market.The result of England's having gone through – and survived—a political revolution in the seventeenth century, made it possible, paradoxically, for democracy to develop despite the restoration of the monarchy. James II (a Catholic) who came to the English throne in 1685, was overthrown by Protestant Slaterman under William of Orange, who invaded England in 1688, forcing James to flee to France. The English Parliament then crowned William and his wife Mary, but also passed legislations severely restricting the powers of the sovereign.

Along with these economic and political developments came deeper social changes, and a questioning of the very idea of society, its supposed nature as a civilising force, and its values. This scepticism about society –clearly present in Jane Austen's work—does seem restricted to writers and thinkers, and though it spread gradually, a far-reaching change in the middle-class values of the time cannot be supposed to have been an immediate result. The prevalent intellectual mood of the time is an interesting one in that it combines a belief in the progress of human capacities and in the universals of 'Nature' and 'Reason' with a questioning and even a subversion of the optimism that saw 'man' as a fulfilled and enlightened being. This optimism can

be most clearly seen in a phrase often repeated at the time, 'the Age of Improvement'. Such 'improvement' carries connotations of a self-satisfied pride in the progress of human knowledge (significantly, this was also the time when encyclopedias first appeared), a pride not particularly tempered by the acknowledgement of the divine that had remained present even in the humanism of the Renaissance. One area where such 'improvement' manifested itself, and which is clearly satirized by Jane Austen, is that of 'landscape improvement' and the improvement of old country houses like Southerton Court in *Mansfield Park*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the things Elizabeth most admires about the grounds at Pemberley (and this is intended to be commendatory of its owner, Darcy) is the fact that they have not been subjected to such improvement, and retain a natural appearance.

1.2.2 The Enlightenment

The "enlightenment" is the name commonly given to an intellectual movement usually associated with the eighteenth century, though its origins can be traced back to a period earlier than that. Its most important feature is a belief in reason as a defining characteristic of human beings. Along with this goes the idea that reason, if correctly used, is the right weapon against superstition and tyranny. Reason is thus considered perfectly consistent with revolution. The roots of the Enlightenment have been traced by some scholars to a period as far back as the 13th century, which saw a renewed interest in, and appropriation of, Aristotelian logic by the medieval scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas who used the logical procedures elaborated by Aristotle, to defend the dogmas of Christianity, thus bringing together two concepts (those of 'faith' and 'logic') which had been largely polarized before this period. This method of using logic could not, however, remain confined to the church's purpose of upholding its teachings, and as had happened in the pagan culture of its origin, it eventually began to be used to question traditional ideas and beliefs. The Renaissance Humanists, a group of thinkers in Italy and France in the 14th century, argued that the proper worship of God requires an admiration of his creation, and especially of humanity, as the 'crown' of that creation. Of all creation, humanity alone has the power of creation, and since this power is seen as a divine one, humans are therefore not only created in the image of God but also share his creative power. 'Reason' in the Enlightenment usually refers to common sense, powers of observation and deduction, and scepticism in thought and the exercise of this faculty becomes a moral duty for human beings. This was however only one strand of thought in the seventeenth century, and one by no means strong enough to overcome the dogma and fanaticism which manifested itself in witch-hunts and wars of religion and of imperial conquest. The idea of 'Nature', inherited along with other Renaissance absolutes of 'goodness', 'truth' and 'reason', is not during this period a fixed or uniform one, and continues to change and evolve with time. To begin with, it means whatever is 'original' and precedes 'culture' or human civilization, but this soon gives way to a different conception that sees the fullest development of nature in art and civilization. A third view is that of nature as an inner moral law that is imprinted in the minds of human beings. 'Nature' is thus appropriated by very different – and often mutually opposed – streams of thought, and variously made to fit the purposes of ethics, satire, science, religion and politics. . Neoclassicism, a literary movement that advocated the close study of, and imitation, of, classical writers (especially the Romans) extended the pursuit of 'balance' and 'proportion' to literature. Writers like Dryden, Pope and Johnson emphasized the need for order and harmony as a safeguard against the folly and excess to which human society is prone.

One of the concerns most closely identified with Enlightenment thought is the epistemological strain that studies the concept, the nature and the possible extent of human knowledge. The main questions posed by this kind of philosophic thought are what it means to know something, whether we can know anything at all, and if so how much and in what ways. 'Knowledge' is now conceived as a conceptual category rather than a quantifiable entity. 'Truth' cannot be demonstrably proven or asserted, but could be recognized instead as a relative and culturally contingent idea. It follows that if 'truth' (or 'virtue') is not an eternally relevant absolute, that morality

also becomes relative and cannot be imposed on anyone. Descartes sees the knowledge of one's own existence as the minimum of human knowledge, and allies it with the human power of thought.

> Good sense is of all things in the world the most equally distributed, for everybody thinks himself so abundantly provided with it that even those most difficult to please in all other matters do not commonly desire more of it than they already possess. It is unlikely that this is an error on their part; it seems rather to be evidence in support of the view that the power of forming a good judgement and of distinguishing the true from the false, which is properly speaking what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men. (James Fieser (ed.) (1996) Descartes. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and seeking for Truth in the Sciences* 1637, Internet Release)

This passage provides an example of the Enlightenment 'absolutes' of 'reason' and 'good sense', locating them in 'nature' and in doing so, offering a definition of the latter term. The human (more specifically the social) behaviour that resulted from ideas such as these are certainly satirized by more than one writer in the eighteenth century, Jane Austen among them.

The Enlightenment has been criticized by current literary and cultural theorists, as much for its ideals as for its failure to live up to them, but its confidence in human 'nature' and human capacity has certainly decisively shaped the subsequent intellectual history of Europe and the Enlightenment notions of human rights and religious tolerance, even if they have been often deviated from in practice, remain among the most powerful principles in the public life of the twentieth century, and can be seen to be behind the various liberationist movements that have emerged during this period. The following quote from the theorist Michel Foucault, provides yet another idea of why the Enlightenment is essential to subsequent Western thought's understanding of itself. For Foucault, the enlightenment does not predate the 'modern' but is its starting point:

> ... we find ourselves asking whether modernity constitutes the sequel to the Enlightenment and its development, or whether we are to see it as a rupture or a deviation with respect to the basic principles of the 18th century. I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. I do not pretend to be summarizing in these few lines either the complex historical event that was the Enlightenment, at the end of the eighteenth century, or the attitude of modernity in the various guises it may have taken on during the last two centuries. I have been seeking, on the one hand, to emphasize the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation, one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject is rooted in the Enlightenment ... We must never forget that the Enlightenment is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word, even if many of these phenomena remain important today (Foucault, 1984)

I quote the passage at length because it seems to me to convey very clearly a feature of the Enlightenment that we tend to ignore, namely its plurality. This is also evident from the fact that much of the Augustan attempt to protect inherited absolutes by looking to the past came from the awareness of imminent change. Once we get away from a picture of the Enlightenment as a unified and monolithic event or moment in history, we are better placed to look at Jane Austen's novels as drawing on many

quite different contemporary strands of thought, and also to see them as attempting to deal with a fast-changing reality instead of a supposedly 'stable' one.

1.2.3 The Beginning of Romanticism

The Romantic movement in Europe roughly covers the period from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Though it involves a move away from the scientific and critical rationalism of the empirical thinkers (Locke and Hume in particular) its stress on 'Nature' as an ideal places it very much within the Enlightenment, of which it could be seen as one of the main developments. Romanticism dissociated 'nature' from civilization, in favour of primitivism, and began to replace the linking of nature with 'reason' by allying it instead with the imagination or 'fancy'. The stress came to be on human subjectivity as well as on the subjectivity of the external world, since the imagination was seen as creating and projecting its own world.

M.H Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* identifies one of the constitutive elements of the very gradual rise of the Romantic world-view in the shift from the eighteenth-century view of nature to the idea that "the mind is creative in perception, and an integral part of an organically inter-related universe." Though Abrams is speaking specifically with regard to Wordsworth, the statement is also more broadly applicable and is useful for an understanding of Romanticism in general. Wordsworth, according to this reading, remains within the eighteenth century tradition of thought in many crucial ways despite some radical departures from it, the most important of these being the belief in a universal human nature (chiefly characterized by reason and feeling) and the idea that the shared opinions and feelings of mankind are the best basis for the aesthetic. This does go to show that the development of Romanticism need not be seen only in opposition to Enlightenment thought (or, to put it simply, the nineteenth century did not necessarily shape itself as against the preceding period) but that one is the eventual – one might even say the necessary—development of the other. Wordsworth ought not to be ignored in this context, because though he is commonly thought of as belonging to a period later than Jane Austen by virtue of their being respectively, a 'Romantic' poet and an 'Augustan' novelist, they were in fact contemporaries. Though he does not figure among Jane Austen's mentioned favourite poets (Cowper and Crabbe are the best known of them) Wordsworth was already a major poet by 1811 when her first novel was published.

One of the defining traits of Romanticism is the tendency to privilege individual experience and expression over the collective or the social. Personal 'sensibility' might thus override the categories of race, sex and class. In literature this means a strong emphasis on subjectivity, on spontaneous expression and on the internalising of all experience. These features of Romanticism clearly emerge (not necessarily without criticism) in Jane Austen's work. Look for instance at the way in which Elizabeth's personal 'prejudice' causes her to think in a certain way about both Wickham and Darcy, and to act according to a completely subjective reality – insofar as it is real to her—which has very little to do with things as they actually are, or turn out to be. All the same, the fact that there is finally one unequivocal truth which emerges at the end of the novel, and not simply everyone's own version of the truth, prevents this 'subjectivity' from being carried to the extremes that are explored by later Romantic and modernist literature. I think that the *nature* of this truth itself, is less crucial in the text than the *process* by which it is reached by the main characters, and would cite as evidence of this the fact that there is no moment of revelation independent of Elizabeth's consciousness, and that the reader has been led astray along with her. What do *you* think?

1.2.4 Jane Austen's work in the context of the Romantic movement.

Jane Austen's work does take into account the two opposing sets of impulses that emerge in the two decades (1798-1818) when she wrote most of her novels. This is a

concern with the social context of human beings with the romantic emphasis on the individual self in isolation. Meenakshi Mukherjee sees Jane Austen's major contribution as the extension of the 'self' (which had so far been all-male) to include woman. Jane Austen wrote and published her novels when the Romantic movement in literature had begun to emerge, though her novels are usually read as part of the eighteenth century tradition of reason and good sense which this movement reacted against. She ridicules the lack of realism, falsities of sentiment and lack of psychological veracity in the treatment of character in the novels of sensibility and the gothic novels which enjoyed great popularity in her time. Her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* (published in 1817 after her death) exposes through parody the sentiments and perceptions associated with gothic romances and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) similarly points out the danger of an uncritical acceptance of the cult of sensibility.

Jane Austen's refusal to include magical, miraculous or fantastic elements in her writing, her distrust of emotional effusiveness, and her choice of ordinary human beings instead of grand or heroic figures as characters for her novels, must be seen in the context of the rise of the novel earlier in the eighteenth century, when 'realism' intended to affirm a 'scientific' outlook and democratic values — the newly ascendant middle classes defined these against the fatalism and mysticism of the romances. But Romanticism is more than a re-assertion of outmoded and earlier discarded irrationalities – it also voices dissatisfaction with the inherited ideals of rationality and good sense. The instinctive and passional self of Romantic literature also repudiates what it saw as the repressive and qualified uniformity of these ideals. Jane Austen has been, on the one hand, accused of ignoring this aspect of Romanticism, and on the other, identified as one of its initiators in the genre of fiction. Ruth Vanita, for instance, sees Jane Austen as a Romantic novelist because of her interest in the juxtaposition of inner and outer worlds, the movement of the individual consciousness between these worlds, and the insistence in the novels on love and friendship as the best basis for human community.

Do pause for a moment here and consider the nature of 'Romanticism' as a literary category. I think it is important to remember that while we need to posit this and other such categories, to place each individual author firmly in one category or the other is a more suspect enterprise. Suppose that we were to look at 'Romantic' texts in terms of certain shared features that they might possess in very varying degrees, instead of necessary conditions that they must conform to in order to be accepted within this category. There do remain authors and texts that can inhabit two categories simultaneously, and Jane Austen seems to me to be one of them, being both Romantic and Augustan. The question as to whether the presence of such authors or even genres (the domestic novel for instance has usually been considered less of a 'Romantic' genre than the lyric poem) can bring about a redefinition of the categories themselves, is a rather more complex one which I shan't go into here.

1.2.5 The Rise of the Novel

The emergence of the novel as a form of realistic narrative in the eighteenth century came about with an acceleration in the changes that had been taking place in the social structures of Europe since the Renaissance. The narrative form of the romance represented the values and attitudes of a feudal society, both heirarchical and relatively static, which was challenged by the expansion of market forces. Classes and groups associated with trade and manufacture now gained ascendency in society, a development that brought along a confidence in human power to change one's own existence or destiny. Religion was correspondingly redefined with a stress on the individual's spiritual experience and the emergence of a secular morality based on the idea of personal responsibility. This new set of values is embodied in the novel during its development in the earlier half of the eighteenth century with the writings of Defoe, Fielding and Richardson. In the process, the novel took the form of realism and adopted the necessary technical devices to embody in a narrative form the

thought and values which (for purposes of convenience) we call enlightenment humanism. The new genre was challenging enough in its emergence to call for comparisons with the 'heroic' genre of the epic.

1.2.6 Jane Austen's Work and the Development of the Realist Novel

By the time we come to Jane Austen, a decline in the significance of the novel had taken place, in order to consider which we have to look at the concrete form taken by enlightenment humanism in the eighteenth century. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, as a consequence of the compromise effected through the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the same classes which had earlier been engaged in a bitter conflict over state power, came together in a relatively unified social formation, consisting of large sections of landed aristocracy, the rural gentry and the middle classes associated with the professions and with trade and industry. A workable consensus evolved from different interpretations of the values of enlightenment humanism, to create the ideals of reason and good sense. The 'consensus' mentioned above did not however have a fixed meaning despite its apparent structural unity, since different sections of society viewed it differently according to their comparative strength and the scope of their perspective for accommodating a variety of opinion. All the major novelists of the eighteenth century show an awareness of these inner contradictions and tensions, and as attempts to project them in their works. One of their concerns was to develop effective technical devices to embody all the aspects of Augustan culture, including its contradictions. One of these contradictions relates to the space to be provided to the individual in the community. While the landed aristocracy was not sufficiently responsive to the individual need for an assertion of personal identity, large sections of the rural gentry and the middle classes associated with the professions, trade and industry were prepared to concede a much wider area of freedom to the individual. However, even here, the individual freedom of women was severely restricted. Both Fielding and Richardson deal with the problematic nature of the relation between the individual and society, and try to resolve the problem through a plot where the rights of the individual are somehow balanced by his or her obligations to society. The treatment of the theme of love and marriage in the works of both these writers reflects their position on these important issues, though Richardson might be said to give greater importance to the subjectivity of the characters than Fielding does.

Another source of tension was the split between the idealistic aspirations of the individual and the materialism of society. These conflicts both found expression in, and influenced the development of the realist novel –particularly the novel of social and domestic comedy—in England. The literary device of the judicious observer and commentator became a method used by novelists, not only to highlight the existence of these tensions, but also to stress the need for finding a resolution. A third contradiction is present in the conflict of class interests. Within the apparently unified social formation consisting of different classes and groups, there existed incessant competition, and as the century advanced, the terms were increasingly weighted in favour of the industrial and commercial classes. Richardson's *Pamela* offers an example of a comic resolution of this conflict of class interests, effected through the incorporation of the deserving lower-class individual into the higher class. One of the strengths of Fielding and Richardson is that they evolved a narrative form which was flexible enough to register these contradictory aspirations as well as to suggest a suitable method for their resolution.

By the time of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, who were Jane Austen's immediate predecessors, the differences in the perspectives and attitudes of the different classes and factions of society seems to have become almost intractable. Since these writers place women characters at the centre of their work, they are even better able to portray the problematic relationship between the individual and society. In doing so their novels become sentimental and unrealistic, because of the

which appears unsatisfactory to them, or the confidence to find a viable solution to the problem.

As noted earlier in this unit, Jane Austen consciously and deliberately identified herself with the eighteenth century tradition of realism in the novel though she doesn't imitate the methods and techniques developed by her predecessors, or adopt their values and attitudes. Instead she makes creative use of an inherited tradition to deal with the issues and problems of contemporary social developments, to try and find a proper comic resolution to conflicts, while continuing to show an awareness of their acuteness. She came from a section of the gentry which had strong links with the middle classes belonging to the professions, trade and industry, and which played an important role in working towards a resolution of these conflicts because it had a real interest in preserving stability. The "universal truths" of the Augustan ideal – reason and good sense—are stated in her texts but are then subjected to an ironical subversion.

1.3 JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE AND WORKS

I shall here offer only a brief outline of Jane Austen's life, and suggest that you read at least one of the many available biographies which offer more detailed analyses of her personal experience in relation to her work.

Jane Austen was born on the 16th of December, 1775 at Steventon in Hampshire. She was the seventh of the eight children,(and the second daughter) of the Rev. George Austen who was the local rector, and his wife Cassandra, (*née* Leigh). Jane Austen's father had a fairly respectable income of about £600 a year, and belonged to the landed gentry, but was certainly not a rich man. His wife, however, belonged to a family (the Leighs) which was proud of its aristocratic links. Since the couple ran a boy's school at the parsonage where they lived, Jane and her brothers and sisters grew up alongside the students, and as a child, Jane was (like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*) both fond of and well-acquainted with boy's games.

In 1783, when Jane was eight years old, she was sent, along with her sister Cassandra, to a school run by a Mrs. Cowley (who was the sister of one of their uncles), first in Southampton and later in Oxford, but they returned home after an infectious disease broke out at the school. Two years later, in 1785, they were sent to the Abbey Boarding school in Reading, on which Mrs. Goddard's school in *Emma* is supposedly based. In her parents' opinion, Jane was actually too young to go to school, but reportedly insisted on accompanying Cassandra, from whom she was inseparable – her mother said of the situation that "if Cassandra's head had been going to be cut off, Jane would have hers cut off too". Except for the short periods of time she spent at these schools, Jane Austen received no other formal education outside her family. She did learn, along with her sister, the accomplishments – chief among them how to draw and play the piano– considered necessary for girls. She also read quite widely and was acquainted with both the serious and the popular literature of the day, including the novels of Fielding, Richardson and Fanny Burney (the title for *Pride and Prejudice* is taken from a phrase in Burney's *Cecilia.*) The three novels that she praised in her famous "Défense of the Novel" in *Northanger Abbey* were Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* and she once wrote that she and her family "were great novel readers, and not ashamed of being so." One of the favourite pastimes at the rectory was the staging of amateur theatricals, which throws an interesting light on the apparent disapproval of play-acting in *Mansfield Park*, causing some critics to see it as influenced by the changed moral climate of a period closer to the Victorian age, than that of Jane Austen's childhood. Jane Austen wrote her *Juvenilia* between 1787 and 1793. This early work consists mainly of parodies of prevailing literary trends (such as in *Love and Friendship*) which were

her relatives or family friends, and circulated among the same circle, these pieces are clearly written above all for the amusement of her family.

Jane Austen had begun work on earlier versions of *Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey* between 1795 and 1799. Their working titles were *Elinor and Marianne, First Impressions* and *Susan* respectively . But *First Impressions* was refused by the publisher to whom Jane Austen's father showed the manuscript in 1797.

Jane Austen apparently enjoyed social events like balls and parties, and was particularly fond of dancing – a famous (though clearly malicious) description of her by one Mrs. Mitford calls her "The prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly" that she could remember. An early romance (in 1795-6) that ended because of a lack of money on both sides, may have been an unhappy experience that surfaces in the analysis of money and marriage in the novels. Jane Austen eventually never married. After her father's death in 1805, Jane, along with her mother and sister, moved to Bath, staying there only a few months before going on to Southampton, and from there to Hampshire in 1809.

In 1803, *Northanger Abbey* was sold to a publisher, but it did not appear in print until fourteen years later, while *Sense and Sensibility* appeared anonymously ("By a Lady") in 1811. *Pride and Prejudice,* as *First Impressions* had now been renamed, was sold in November 1812, and published in January 1813, to a favourable reception and the first edition was followed by another later in the same year. A second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was published in October 1813, followed by *Mansfield Park* in 1814, while she had already started work on *Emma*, which appeared in December 1815. *Persuasion* was begun in August 1815 and completed exactly a year later. She started work on another novel, *Sandition* in 1817, but had to give it up because of her increasing ill-health. She died at Winchester on July 18, 1817, (of a disease undiagnosed at the time, but later conjectured to have been either Addison's disease or 'trigeminal neuralgia') and was buried in Winchester Cathedral. *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously toward the end of 1817 in a combined edition of four volumes, with a "Biographical Notice of the Author" by her brother Henry.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

The Enlightenment is looked at as the manifestation of the intellectual and political conditions prevalent in Europe during the course of the eighteenth century. Jane Austen's work is then considered in the context of the Romantic movement which begins to emerge at this moment in history. Secondly, the rise of the novel and of the genre of realist fiction to which Jane Austen's work belongs, are traced with a view to placing her work within a certain literary tradition, and also looking at the ways in which it is constitutive of that tradition .

1.5 GLOSSARY

Habeas Corpus — Latin term used in a writ requiring a person to be brought before a judge or into court for the purpose specified in the writ.

Subjectivity — Consciousness of one's perceived states; the quality or condition of viewing things exclusively through the medium of one's own mind or individuality.

Universals What is applicable to, or involves, all the individuals or species of a class or genus; an abstract or general concept regarded as having an absolute, mental, or nominal existence.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. What are the main aspects of Enlightenment humanism which gave rise to the need for a new type of narrative in the eighteenth century?

2. Mention some of the technical devices used by novelists in the eighteenth century, which Jane Austen uses in a modified form.

1.7 SUGGESTED READING

Willey, Basil — *The Eighteenth Century Background.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1953.

Foucault, Michel — *What is Enlightenment: Was ist Aufklerung?* Unpublished ms.transl. Catherine Porter in Paul Rabinow ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Watt, Ian — *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.

Uphaus, Robert Ed — *The Idea of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century.* U.S.A: Colleagues Press, 1988.

Tomalin, Clare — *Jane Austen: A Life.* London: Viking, 1997, Penguin, 1988.

UNIT 2 MAIN THEMES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*-1

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 'Pride' and 'Prejudice'
  2.2.1 The Title
  2.2.2 The Characters
2.3 Love and Marriage
2.4 Let Us Sum Up
2.5 Glossary
2.6 Questions
2.7 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to offer a possible point of entry into the text by looking at the title and picking out as major themes, the characteristics or feelings to which it refers. These are first looked at in isolation and then in the context of some of the text's larger concerns.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It might be best to begin with a tentative outlining of what we are doing in setting out to extract 'themes' from this (or any) text. The term 'theme' when used in relation to a literary text, has been variously used to mean an argument, a claim, or an issue raised in the text, but this working definition does not specify whether or not the theme simply raises questions or also proposes answers, and whether thematic elements in a text depend entirely upon a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to raise a certain issue. I think that on the whole we shall restrict ourselves to the latter stand and look for authorial intention with regard to *Pride and Prejudice*, but do try to keep in mind that what Arnold Kettle says about *Emma* ("the subject ... its generalized significance, is not easily or even usefully abstracted from the story") could apply almost as well here.

2.2 'PRIDE' AND 'PREJUDICE'

Some important aspects of Jane Austen's treatment of pride as a theme become more easily intelligible to us when we see her work in the context of the eighteenth century tradition of the realistic novel. Because of the rational and secular framework of the outlook of enlightenment humanism, pride is not presented here in theological terms as a sin but is seen as a common and verifiable fact of human experience which can be analyzed and understood through reasoning. The eighteenth century also witnesses the emergence of the new science of human psychology where human experiences, ideas, feelings, emotions, and experiences in society begin to be studied with the help of methods and concepts used by physical scientists in their study of natural phenomena. Parallel to the concept of matter as a substance which, despite changes in its form, remained essentially the same everywhere, this new science goes

along with (and perhaps even leads to) the evolution of a concept of universal human nature by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Hume. In the physical sciences, elements are classified under different categories, such as metals and non-metals, gases and solids, and are regarded as the basic units of matter which, through different combinations, form the various substances found in nature. Human nature, if similarly considered, could be seen as consisting of some basic traits which combine in different proportions and combinations to form the personalities of different individuals. Human traits are similarly placed in the categories of 'appetites', 'impressions', 'sensations', 'passions' and 'ideas'. In the analysis of a compound, an important part of the job is to break it up into its elements and see how these elements interact with one another. A similar model begins at this time to be used for human personality which is studied by breaking it up into the traits mentioned above and seeing how they interact with one another in order to produce the specific human personality under study.

Jane Austen's treatment of pride conforms to this pattern of scientific and rational analysis. Commenting on pride, David Hume underlines its two special attributes. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he tells us that as against passions like love, where the self draws pleasure from its orientations towards others, the object of pride is the self alone. Pride is then in other words, a form of excessive self-absorption, self-centredness, self-regard or self-esteem. The second attribute of pride, according to Hume is that unlike hunger, greed and lust, pride does not arise from specific bodily organs or the needs of the self, but it is "pleasurable to the self by virtue of demonstrable externals which are seen as *possessions* whether they are mental or physical possessions." Jane Austen's treatment of pride shows its different varieties where both these attributes are clearly visible to a greater or lesser degree.

2.2.1 The Title

The title of the novel may not provide an instant clue to the 'meaning' of the text, but it does indicate at least one theme in fairly unambiguous terms, offering an indication to the text's chief concerns as well as a useful starting-point for a study of them. The title should not be misread to mean that Jane Austen is dealing here with two entities called 'pride' and 'prejudice', which are independent of each other and exist separately in the personality and behaviour of different characters. It would, for example be too simplistic to assume that Darcy embodies pride and Elizabeth prejudice. It soon becomes clear from the text that prejudice is largely considered as a consequence of pride reflected in the attitudes and behaviour both of the person who represents pride and of those who react to it. Pride shows itself in weaknesses – pomposity, stupidity, snobbery or eccentricity — which may make the character's behaviour is look funny or ridiculous. It may also produce a sense of frivolity which makes it difficult for a character like Lydia to understand the consequences of her own actions and makes her insensitive to the pain and suffering she causes others.

2.2.2 The Characters

The text identifies and analyses different forms of pride as they are revealed in the behaviour of various characters, and the difference among them emerges, more often than not, as largely one of degree. In some cases, however, a qualitative difference in the nature of pride is brought out. These different forms of pride are discussed in greater detail later, but it is important to remember here that two such forms are explicitly distinguished from each other in the rather pedantic definitions of "pride" and "vanity" provided by Mary, according to whom "Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us". For once she might be held to be correct, as far as events and revelations of character in the course of the narrative appear to bear out her opinion that pride involves a sense (perhaps even an excessive sense) of self-esteem or self-regard. Still, the more important distinction working behind this difference is that while a sense of dignity and self-respect are substantially present in one form of pride, they are almost negligible in the

other. Darcy's excessive self-esteem is 'pride' of this kind, while Wickham's self-regard is vanity.

Pride is also manifested in varied ways by different characters. Thus the distinction between the vanity of Mr. Collins and that of Sir William Lucas, or the vanity of Lady Catherine de Burgh and that of Mrs. Bennet becomes differentiated because of the presence or absence of other qualities. In order to achieve a sharper focus on pride, certain characters are made to represent a quality opposite to it, so that they can be used for comparison and contrast. So while Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet represent different variants of pride, Bingley and Jane stand for modesty and candour, and the presence of the latter pair helps us in understanding the full meaning of pride in the case of the former, between whom misunderstandings and prejudices delay the development of a relationship. The achievement of happiness in love, therefore, becomes contingent upon the development of a proper understanding of weaknesses originating in pride.

If 'excessive self-regard' is based on an external possession which is not a personal attainment but something acquired through a quirk of chance or fortune (inherited wealth for example) pride takes the form of snobbery. Pride as selfishness pervades the social environment in *Pride and Prejudice* insofar as people's attitudes towards each other depend on the benefit or gain they can derive from them. The most notable instance of this kind of pride is of course Wickham but it is also present in the excessive importance given to petty conveniences and the lack of interest in anything outside a narrow range of personal interests in characters like Mrs. Bennet, Lydia and the two Bingley sisters. As excessive self-esteem which goes with a legitimate sense of dignity and independence of spirit, it is most notably present in Darcy, although Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Bennet also possess it. Pride in this form becomes almost a distorted or perverted expression of the dignity and integrity of the self.

While both haughtiness and snobbery are shown to make people unsociable or cold and contemptuous, self-centredness and selfishness do not prevent them from being voluble and prone to gossip, and in the case of Wickham, even enticingly agreeable. Self-esteem may make a character assertive like Elizabeth Bennet or eccentrically withdrawn like her father. Snobbery may make a character superciliously non-communicative like the Bingley sisters when they have to mix with people of inferior rank or it may make them officiously patronising, domineering and rude like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Pride in the form of vanity which is often a combination of selfishness and self-centredness can make a person pompous like Mr. Collins, fatuous like Sir William Lucas, giddily talkative and insensitive like Lydia or fretful like Kitty.

All these forms of pride are demonstrated both through dialogue and authorial comment. One main interest is of course the pride of characters like Darcy and Elizabeth, actually a curable distortion of a positive concern for integrity and independence of spirit. But this positive side of self-esteem can be viewed as a concern not fully covered by pride and will be discussed separately when love is taken up as a theme of the novel.

The eighteenth-century thinkers who posit the concept of universal human nature follow the analogy of the physical sciences in another respect which is relevant to Jane Austen's treatment of the theme of pride in *Pride and Prejudice.* In the physical sciences, the structure of argument is raised on the bases of sensory data obtained either through experiments in the laboratory or information collected from reliable findings by other observers. The important thing in this empirical method is the reliability, verifiability and impartiality of the data. The new science of human nature also starts from what were called the 'impressions' and the structure of the argument is erected empirically after trying to eliminate subjective biases or providing a calculated margin of error for them. Biases caused by the pride of the observer or reporter are among the sources of such errors.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we are shown the ways in which observation, and subsequently communication, become distorted by the pride of those involved in the process. The title Jane Austen gave to the first draft of the novel was *First Impressions*. The novel persistently brings to our notice the unreliability of first impressions, even those of intelligent and observant people like Elizabeth and Darcy. On account of his prejudices (rooted in pride), Darcy manages to offend the ladies assembled at the Meryton ball by not paying them the attention that courtesy demands — even Elizabeth is dismissed by him with a casual remark to the effect that she was "tolerable" but not attractive enough to make him want to dance with her. Elizabeth's hurt vanity similarly distorts her judgement of the characters of Wickham as well as Darcy, something she acknowledges later saying, "How humiliating is this discovery....But vanity, not love has been my folly."

Also notice the way in which every important incident in the novel is preceded by some rumour or followed by gossip, both obscuring the true version of things – this serves to emphasize the need for a disinterested analysis of what comes to us through hearsay. Language, Jane Austen seems to be saying, is a tangled web since the subjective colouring it acquires under the interests of individuals and groups (which is one meaning of pride or vanity in the novel) has to be recognised and examined in order to get through to the truth. This 'truth' is, importantly, valid for the entire community or society, that is to say it is not a subjective truth.

Pride is not an abstraction here, but a general notion which codifies a large area of human experience under a system of cognition and evaluation which had been evolved by eighteenth century thinkers on behalf of a dominant social formation playing an active role in shaping the historical development of English society.

2.3 LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Jane Austen's interest in pride could be seen as part of her concern with another theme, that of exploring whether the possibilities of a meaningful and durable love relationship (that ends in marriage) between a young man and a young woman, , do really exist in the society of her times. Marriage is analysed on two levels – in terms of external obstacles like patriarchy and property relations (see 3.4) and in terms of the characters' personal attributes. Pride seems to be among the most harmful of such attributes since it has to be overcome by a process of self-education before love can culminate in marriage.

In all love comedies, and more generally, in literature that centres itself around the theme of romantic or sexual love, the man-woman relationship is invested with an extraordinary significance and is considered an experience that transforms the lovers. The best example is the exalted notion of love in the medieval romances where it is considered at par with religious devotion. As pointed out earlier, (see 1.3.5) the novel had emerged in the eighteenth century in conscious opposition to the traditional romances. Most of the attitudes and conventions found in the earlier romances were discarded as outdated and irrelevant. An exception was, however, made in the case of love as a theme and the high value attached to it as an experience. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of a widely popular tradition of novels where love was a dominant theme, Richardson's *Pamela* being the prototype of this kind of novel. Love was treated here as a prized experience comparable to that in the romances, but there were important differences. For example, love was not shown in isolation from other emotions and urges, but had to grow and develop by countering their presence. The novel of sensibility which followed in the second half of the eighteenth century maintained, on the whole, the psychological and social realism achieved by Richardson in *Pamela* but the gap between the noble aspirations of the lovers and the crudely materialistic and manipulative social environment became much wider here.

Jane Austen discarded the indulgent subjectivity of the novel of sensibility and restored to love comedy the realism it had earlier possessed in the writings of Richardson and Fielding. In order to understand the distinctive features of Jane Austen's treatment of love in *Pride and Prejudice* we should perhaps go back, as A.N. Kaul has suggested in *The Action of English Comedy* to Shakespeare's comedy of love which represents the initial break with the medieval notions of romantic love.

The most important distinction between the courtly love of the medieval romances and love as portrayed in Shakespeare's comedies, however, lies in the latter's being a way of self-affirmation and expression for the individual, whereas courtly love had demanded a total surrender of the self. While giving priority to love as a theme, Shakespeare did not separate it from social activities since as a mode of self-affirmation it formed an integral part of the larger agenda of general emancipation..

The blending of the personal and the social significance of love in Shakespeare's comedy made it quite natural that it should take the form of a durable union in marriage. In post-Renaissance society a space had been created for marriage to become simultaneously a union between two individual's which signified the sanctity, intensity and persistent strength of their love and an institution which fitted them appropriately into prevailing social hierarchies. In the comedy of love, marriage was presented as a culminating point in this twin process of self-affirmation and social adjustment. When the love comedy made its appearance in the eighteenth century novel, it was basically as a continuation of this tradition. However, we often find in these novels divergence between the significance of marriage as the culminating point of love between two individuals, and its meaning as a means of their incorporation into the prevailing social hierarchies.The novel at this time also explores the limits within which assertion of an individual autonomy could be accepted as valid. The pressure in this regard was particularly acute in the case of women who were neither accorded the full status of independent, sensitive and rational human beings nor given parity in property rights and economic opportunities. The comedy of love, therefore, had to include as a necessary part of its structure a serious and sustained probing of the conditions under which the possibilities of a meaningful and intense love relationship could be actualized in contemporary social conditions. For a proper understanding of Jane Austen's handling of the theme of love and marriage, it will be helpful to take into consideration a significant change which took place in the social and cultural climate of English society at the specific juncture when she wrote her novels. The aftermath of the French Revolution and the protracted war between England and France made the social groups in the culturally dominant alliance extremely distrustful of the radical politics implicit in the ideal of freedom and dignity of the individual they had accepted earlier as an integral part of their collective outlook and value system. The emphasis on an individual's right to think and choose for himself had by this time become so pronounced in the general outlook that when this conservative shift took place, it became virtually impossible to give up these rights completely. The dilemma was resolved by muting down the political dimension of the ideal of individual autonomy substantially but affirming at the same time with even greater intensity than before, its operative power in the private sphere of personal relationships. It is this intensified affirmation of the ideal in the restricted sphere of personal relationships that enabled Jane Austen to lend authenticity and force to her projection of love between Elizabeth and Darcy as a mode of affirmation of their autonomy as individuals and reinforce this impression through her depiction of love between Jane and Bingley.

It has, however, to be emphasized that in bringing this superior conception of love centre-stage, Jane Austen does not underestimate the presence of attitudes and impulsions in society which go against it. She recognizes the cynicism and disdain for women and the view of them as mere objects of pleasure or as the route to instant prosperity, which were prevalent among a section of the dominant social and cultural groups. Wickham represents this attitude in *Pride and Prejudice*, though Jane Austen takes only a limited interest in the moral and psychological make-up of such superficially amiable rakes.

There is another negative attitude which Jane Austen takes more seriously –that of the materialism and economic individualism of the up-coming middle classes. Jane Austen deliberately shows the love relationship slowly gaining strength and maturing by contending against the pull of this negative force present everywhere. The varied forms it can take are brought out vividly before us through different characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. We can see it in its grosser forms in the dullness and pomposity of Mr. Collins or the obtrusively meddlesome and domineering behaviour of Lady Catherine. It is present in characters like Mrs. Philip who loves to collect and transmit idle gossip. We can also see it in the supercilious finickiness of the Bingley sisters. Mrs. Bennet, too, is governed by this spirit as her obsessive concern for the marriage of her daughters is based on the presumption that daughters are perishable commodities to be disposed of quickly before their market value goes down and the young man to whom they are to be married off are reluctant customers to be assiduously cultivated to make them agree to complete the transaction.

Jane Austen presents two pairs of lovers in the novel in order to show that the concept of individual autonomy she is invoking is quite complex and a single pair of characters would not give us a fair idea of the full range of human qualities she wants to put into their love-relationship. While Elizabeth and Darcy represent an actively assertive form of independence and critical intelligence, the secondary emphasis falls on Jane's and Bingley's candour and goodwill. For characters like Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Bingley, marriage primarily means culmination of a love relationship which starts with mutual physical attraction but necessarily includes feelings of mutual respect, esteem and confidence" (II, XIX). Most marriages in the novel do not conform to this ideal, but the manner in which the story of the heroine's love has been built up demonstrates that such an ideal has sufficient social validity and is to be recognized as a real possibility that can materialize in the normal course of happening in the prevailing social environment. All the four characters who successfully achieve marriages of love are normal products of the middle-class way of life and have their distinctive space in the society. The structure of society with its class and gender iniquities is not challenged politically, but substantive opportunities for fulfilment of love are located within its ambit. This emphasis on the "self-education" of the hero and heroine and the insistence on discovering a vantage-point of compatibility between love and prudence, both indicate that Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage is located in an exploration of the best possibilities available within the limits of the existing social order. Her challenge to class-based snobbery, patriarchal smugness and bourgeois philistinism has to be viewed in this perspective.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

'Pride' and 'prejudice' are picked out as two of the text's main themes, and are considered with reference to the humanist conception of character. These two themes are seen to open up several others, especially those of love and marriage. The themes are also considered in terms of the individual characters, in the portrayals of which they are constitutive factors.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Autonomy — Personal freedom (of the will) to self-determination

Philistinism — An attitude lacking in liberal culture. The term is derived from contemptuous references to the Philistines, a group of warlike people who occupied the southern sea-coast of Palestine, and constantly harassed the Israelites.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss briefly and illustrate the two kinds of pride which, in your view, figure most prominently in *Pride and Prejudice.*

2. What are the salient features of the system of thought in terms of which pride has been dealt with as a theme in *Pride and Prejudice?*

2.7 SUGGESTED READING

Hardy, Barbara — *A Reading of Jane Austen*. London: The Athlone Press, 1975, rptd. 1979.

David Grey Ed. — *The Jane Austen Handbook*. London: Athlone, 1986.

UNIT 3 MAIN THEMES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*-2

Structure

3.0 Objectives
3.1 Introduction
3.2 Women
  3.2.1 Social Position
  3.2.2 Education and 'Accomplishments'
3.3 Money and Property
  3.3.1 Income
  3.3.2 Settlements
  3.3.3 Entails and Inheritance
3.4 Marriage
3.5 Let Us Sum Up
3.6 Glossary
3.7 Questions
3.8 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to look at the ways in which the contemporary realities of women's lives and their position in society inform the treatment of these aspects in the text.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin with these extracts from a poem called *The Unsex'd Females* written by Richard Polwhele in 1798:

> See Wollestonecraft, whom no decorum checks,
> Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex;
> O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,
> And slight the timid blush of virgin fame
>
> ...Soon shall the sex disdain the illusive sway,
> And wield the sceptre in yon blaze of day;
> Ere long, each little artifice discard,
> No more by weakness winning fond regard;
> Nor eyes, that sparkle from their blushes, roll,
> Nor catch the languors of the sick'ning soul;
> Nor the quick flutter, nor the coy reserve,
> But nobly boast the firm gymnastic nerve;
> No more affect with Delicacy's fan
> To hide emotion from congenial man;
> To the bold heights where glory beams, aspire,
> Blend mental energy with Passion's fire;
> Surpass their rivals in the powers of mind,
> And vindicate the Rights ofWomankind."

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a number of women, both individually and in groups, began to express dissatisfaction with the current state of women's education and the restricted role they were allotted in intellectual and political life. Among the best-known of these is Mary Wollestonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1797) is an early revolutionary feminist work. Wollestonecraft asks in particular for women's education to move away from the aim of training women to be pleasing to men, and to prepare them instead for a more equal participation in revolution, though she does also hold that women ought to be prepared for their role in companionate marriage, which she advocated. The response this text generated includes strong praise as well as outrage, both often quite indistinct.

The poem quoted above seems to me to embody perfectly such ambiguity of response (at least that is the effect, whatever Polwhele's intention). Though it offers a diatribe against the proposed changes that threaten to do away with 'femininity', the very things that Wollestonecraft objected to are reproduced in language such as "the languors of the sick'ning soul" which can well be read as if it were upholding the objection.

3.2 WOMEN

3.2.1 Social Position

The position of women changed considerably during the Enlightenment, and, notwithstanding the concern with individual liberty and social welfare, not necessarily for the better. The economic developments that were behind the rise of capitalism also resulted in laws that restricted women's rights to own property and to run business concerns, thus forcing many women out of business – it has been pointed out by Richard Hooker that while women owned and administered about two-thirds of the businesses in London in 1600, the corresponding proportion in 1800 was less than ten percent. This is partly explained when we consider that pre-industrial Europe had the family economy (the economy of the individual household) as its main unit. Women contributed substantially to these economies, providing both agricultural labour and artisanal skills, and often subordinating housework (though this remained the woman's preserve) to this participation, but they could not occupy an equivalent position in the new urban and market economies.

3.2.2 Education and 'Accomplishments'

Sheridan, in his play *The Rivals* which appeared in 1775 (the year of Jane Austen's birth) satirizes the debate over women's education, by having Mrs. Malaprop, one of the funniest characters in the play, protest to Sir Anthony Absolute:

"Observe me, Sir Anthony – I would by no means wish a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning; I don't think so much learning becomes a young woman; for instance – I would never let her meddle with Greek, or Hebrew, or Algebra, or Simony, or Fluxions, or Paradoxes, or such inflammatory branches of learning – neither would it be necessary for her to handle any of your mathematical, astronomical, diabolical instruments; – But, Sir Anthony, I would send her, at nine years old, to a boarding school, in order to learn a little ingenuity and artifice. Then, Sir, she should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts; – and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries; – but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying – This, Sir Anthony, is what I would have a woman know; – and I don't think there is a superstitious article in it."

Now look at another conversation, this time from *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot and Captain Harville are arguing over whether men or women are more constant in love. Captain Harville says "I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy ... but you will say, these were all written by men." to which Anne replies, "Perhaps I shall ...Yes. Yes, if you please, no references to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything."

Both speeches serve, in very different ways, to give us a clear picture of the contemporary condition of women's education, and of the results of its inadequacy. The absence of any system of state-supported education (though there were local charity schools) in Jane Austen's time was crucial in the denying of education to many women, since the 'Grammar schools' which existed to teach upper-class boys did not admit girls. The only alternatives were private boarding schools of the kind that Jane Austen herself attended, and the education imparted here was generally acknowledged to be of a not particularly high order. Most girls were simply taught at home by masters or governesses, and were not allowed into either the 'public schools' like Eton or the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. This meant in effect that women were barred from any knowledge of the classical languages (Greek and Latin) and usually also of history, political thought, philosophy, in short of most branches of learning. Instead they were taught accomplishments such as needlework, drawing, singing and playing the piano, which were considered attractive abilities that might come in useful in securing a husband. Not necessarily pursued with either talent or application, and not even always of much practical use –consider Lady Bertram's never-ending and utterly purposeless "carpet-work" in *Mansfield Park*— these skills are brought up repeatedly in Jane Austen's novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a number of scenes where women have to display their accomplishments in a social situation. Mary since she lacks beauty, is forced to rely on her musical abilities in order to be noticed in society, and she is described as "always impatient for display". There is a conversation on the subject of women's accomplishments at Netherfield where Bingley expresses surprise at the number of skills young ladies are expected (and do) possess. These skills are detailed, and they include painting tables, covering 'screens', netting purses, singing, dancing, drawing, and an acquaintance with "the modern languages", and Darcy adds to this list by saying that a woman ought to also be well-read. Later on Lady Catherine interrogates Elizabeth about her accomplishments, lectures her on how to improve her piano-playing, and makes the extremely dubious assertion that "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply."

3.3 MONEY AND PROPERTY

3.3.1 Income

Most women had no independent means of income and were completely dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands. Professions were closed to women, as was politics and this provides an interesting context for Elizabeth's remark about Lady Catherine – "...though this great lady was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish". It is an ironic remark since it was actually impossible for a woman to be a magistrate or a justice of the peace. One of the very few occupations (and almost the only respectable one) open to women was to be a governess, but in fact the occupation brought poor pay, an often miserable social condition, and not much respect. The only real way for a woman to get money, if she had not inherited it, was to marry for it. Jane Austen herself, though she earned enough from her novels to become economically independent during her

later years, knew from personal experience how restrictive it was to be dependent, even on loved ones. Unmarried women also had to live with their families, and for her to leave her family or guardians without approval, even if it is in order to marry (as Lydia does), was considered a radical step.

3.3.2 Settlements

A 'settlement', which is considered very important if not absolutely necessary in relation to marriage, is a legal document intended to ensure that the property which a woman brings to marriage will ultimately belong to her, and after her, to her children. In a system which grants the husband more or less complete control over such property, such a safeguard functions to at least prevent too blatant an appropriation of this property, even though the wife may not have personal control over it during her marriage. The settlement is usually part of a pre-marital financial agreement that takes place either between the couple themselves, or between their families, and it may also guarantee a certain amount of money to be inherited by the children of the marriage, for example the five thousand pounds which are "settled by marriage articles on Mrs. Bennet and the children" and out of which Mr. Bennet has to give Lydia her share as part of the marital agreement settled upon with Wickham. The importance of the settlement not only in negotiating the terms of a marriage, but also (as in Lydia's case) in bringing it about at all, is used here for two purposes. First, it serves to highlight the economic base of most marriages. Secondly, and in this context, more importantly, it functions as an index to character, through revealing motives of greed. Wickham's refusal to marry Lydia without a settlement that promises him some financial and professional gain, calls into doubt any feelings he might be supposed to have for her.

3.3.3 Entails and Inheritance

An entail is a more complicated legal device, used to prevent a landed property from being broken up, or from descending in a female line. John Hopfner locates the importance of entails during Jane Austen's time, in the fact that ownership of land is in this period more than just a possession, it is also the only steady source of income that ensures for many families the leisure and opportunity for education or for entry into politics. In addition, the ownership of land decisively confers or determines social position, making a familly part of the aristocracy or the gentry. It thus becomes essential to ensure that a landed estate stays safe from subdivision or sale, so a system of primogeniture is evolved. However, if the head of the family dies without sons, and the estate is inherited equally by all the daughters, this leads inevitably to subdivision, and if it is inherited by a single daughter, it becomes part of the estate of her husband's family, neither possibility being a particularly desirable one. Primogeniture is therefore extended to the entire male line and not just to the sons of the holder of the estate, which is what entitles Mr. Collins (a cousin of the Bennet sisters) to eventually inherit the Bennet estate. Behind Mrs. Bennet's constantly expressed dissatisfaction at, and incomprehension of, this state of affairs, is not just greed, but a very real fear of what will happen to her and her daughters (particularly if they remain unmarried) in the event of Mr. Bennet's death.

3.4 MARRIAGE

"Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony." (Jane Austen, letter of March 13, 1816.)

Marriage was usually the only means of social mobility for women, very few of whom could marry without a dowry or some kind of settlement. Most middle class women had to save enough money for their own dowries. In theory a woman could own property and even marry without her father's consent once she had reached the

age of twenty-one, but in practise this remained impossible for all except the exceptionally rich women like Emma who had the freedom to live their lives exactly as they liked. Still, one reason marriage was not to be entered into lightly was that it was almost always for life – divorce was possible **only** in the event that the sexual infidelity of the wife could be proved, and even here the husband had to get permission from Parliament to sue for divorce. The trial was between the husband and the wife's alleged lover, and the woman herself had no say in the matter. There was provision for the possibility of legal separation (neither party could remarry in this case) on the grounds of cruelty, but the husband was usually granted exclusive custody of the children in such cases, and could prevent the wife from seeing them – a sufficient deterrent to most women who might have thought of using the provision.

The pressure to marry that young women constantly faced from parents and relatives is treated comically in *Pride and Prejudice* because it comes mainly from Mrs. Bennet. But *Mansfield Park* provides a more serious illustration of it when Sir Thomas tries to persuade Fanny to marry Henry Crawford against her will. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet express two different ways of looking at the marriage of their children – while Mrs. Bennet is unequivocally happy at Elizabeth's finding a rich husband, Mr. Bennet's concern is that she marry someone she can respect, and he asks anxiously whether Darcy's money will make her happy, not knowing of course that she is marrying for love.

Take another look at the opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice*, already considered in another context. Sharmila Bhatt (in Trivedi, 1996) a critic, points out that they contain the idea that marriage involves a commodification not just of women but also of men.

Since any property a woman might possess before her marriage automatically became her husband's, heiresses were in danger of being married for their money alone by 'fortune-hunters', of whom Wickham is an obvious example — he tries to make Georgiana Darcy elope with him in order to get to her fortune. At the same time, how seriously are we to take Elizabeth's assertion that the sight of the grounds at Pemberley went some way in helping her to change her mind about Darcy? I do not think very seriously, and yet it might well be a factor, however small. Jane Austen does take the view that while greed and materialism are to be despised, even sensible people must devote some serious thought to the issue of money in marriage and it is rather foolish to ignore it completely since not only did one marry for life (divorce was next to impossible) but there was no social security outside it for most women. Though this does not excuse Charlotte Lucas' decision to marry Mr. Collins "from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment" (nothing in the novel really excuses marriage without love) it does make it appear more understandable. Charlotte is after all doing no more than choosing the option that suits her best interests from among a number of fairly disagreeable prospects.

There have been made connections between the rise of the novel and that of the modern nuclear family in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both reach their height during the 19th century though actually the nuclear family has its origins as early as the 15th century. Later in the 19th century, the Victorians saw the family as a refuge and shelter from the outside world, and this shelter as most of all dependent on the woman (in her role as wife or daughter) who is the ideal of domestic femininity – the 'angel in the house'. Common enough in Dickens, something of this view is also present in the character of Fanny who becomes the repository of domestic happiness in *Mansfield Park*, but this particular role is not present for the women in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The text seems to hold mixed views about marriage, seeing it as a culmination of woman's development but also as a diminishment. Though the words identified in Jane Austen's work with the right marriage (a companionate one) are 'affection' and 'esteem', even where these were present in life, things were often different. The

reality of marriage for most women in this period also meant repeated childbirth with the attendant physical discomfort, followed by years spent in child-rearing.

The use of marriage as one of the two most common conventional endings in fiction (the other is death) provides a sense of closure, and makes it possible to bring together the themes and depiction of private and public life. But the use of this device can be seen as an adherence to, and perpetuation of the myth of marriage as the most central and desired aim of a woman's life. Jane Austen seems to conform to this outwardly, but her misgivings on the subject are evident. What is undeniable is her stress on *equality* in marriage, at least for the heroine, though the presence of other mismatched couples make it clear that this ideal isn't always met.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

A consideration of the social and economic realities of women's lives in Jane Austen's time is useful in understanding how far these enter the text of *Pride and Prejudice*. Women were extremely dependent on marriage, and their education aimed at preparing them for this role alone by teaching them skills considered to make them more attractive to men. They were also supposed to cultivate, to the same end, an affected delicacy and helplessness, qualities regarded as 'feminine' and the loss of which was feared by many in the wake of books and movements that sought to change the state of things. Among the most influential of such books was Mary Wollestonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which appeared toward the end of the century.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Contemporary Of (or at) the same time in history

Unequivocally Without any ambiguity.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Identify the chief features of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

2. Does the theme of gender injustice become a part of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage, and if so, in what way?

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

Atkinson, Paul *Fitness, Feminism and Schooling* in *The NineteenthCentury Woman: Her Cultural and Moral World.* Ed. Delamont, Sara & Lorna Duffin 1978.

Cohen, Paula Marantz *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

Trivedi, Harish (Ed.). Jane Austen: An Anthology of Recent Criticism. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1996.

UNIT 4 CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Structure

4.0 Objectives
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Eighteenth Century Ideas about Character
4.3 Fictional Characters
4.4 The Main Characters in *Pride and Prejudice*
4.5 Gender and Character in *Pride and Prejudice*
4.6 Let Us Sum Up
4.7 Glossary
4.8 Questions
4.9 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to offer a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that lays a particular emphasis on the characters on the novel, and that sees these characters as embodying, in themselves as well as in what happens to them, the main themes of the novel.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most immediately striking things about the character-portrayals in Jane Austen's work is the fact that nowhere, unlike in the fiction of Fielding for example, does the reader get the impression of the characters as entirely **manipulated** by the author , or subordinated to the interests of the plot. Plot here does not consist of dramatic happenings and events, but rather arises from character, in that the changes in the thoughts and feelings of the characters is at least as important (and often more so) than any external event. Even a fairly dramatic event like Lydia's elopement is important more for what it reveals of the characters of Lydia, Wickham, and Darcy, and for its role in effecting Elizabeth's changed feelings, rather than for the literal consequences, which are simply that they are forced to marry, and that the marriage does little to make society at large forget the event.

Another very noticeable feature of the portrayal of characters in the novels, and one for which Jane Austen has been repeatedly and extravagantly praised, is their fidelity to life, or more correctly, to 'real' people. One source, both of this feature, and of the fact that it has been so highly valued, is the eighteenth century notion of 'nature', and the idea that the imitation of nature as closely as possible was an ideal of all art. It might be helpful, therefore to look at some of the more common eighteenth century perceptions of character.

4.2 EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IDEAS ABOUT CHARACTER

The most obvious feature of the eighteenth-century conception of human character to a reader today is its self-confident assertion of a universal human nature which holds true in its basic features across different historical contexts. It is impossible for us

today not to question the assumptions behind such a conception of character, but in doing so we do run the risk of simplifying what is a complex and detailed idea, and moreover one that is behind the emergence of the modern'self' or the 'subject', which cannot be seen in isolation, but has to consider them in terms of its simultaneous opposition to, and continuity with, the eighteenth-century idea of the human being. Something of this has already been discussed in 1.4.2 in a discussion of the passage where Foucault asserts that we cannot escape the Enlightenment conception of character, because we cannot extricate ourselves from it. Human nature may have been conceived in the eighteenth century as an inclusive and all-encompassing category, but it does remain a severely limited one, the best example of this limitation being the approximation of human nature to 'Man'. Though this has been much criticized, it is important to remember that the bias is an implicit one – women are not being consciously sought to be excluded from humanity, and indeed are often assumed to be so obviously present that they do not require special mention. 'Man' is held to be not only intrinsically 'good' but also essentially and 'naturally' social. Interestingly, this idea of inherent 'goodness' is problematic not only from the twentieth-century perspective, but also from that of the Christian conception of human nature, since the Christian tradition itself includes contradictory ideas of human virtue – on the one hand, mankind is the supreme part of God's creation, second only to the angels and on the other, there is the presence of original sin, which man brings upon himself through his own deliberate fault. One might argue that the idea of the human being as essentially sinful nowhere enters into the eighteenth century confidence about the naturally rational and moral man, but in fact the force of satire (and this is a period inevitably associated with satire) rests in no small measure upon it — at least two of the most important satirists (Swift and Johnson) were also devout Christians.

In seeing the human being as the most worthy subject of study, this idea of character refers back to Renaissance humanism, and the emphasis on the essential and inborn nature of different types of human character. The theory of humours, which had been part of popular physiology in medieval and Renaissance Europe offered one way of classifying different types of characters, and saw the varying amounts and combinations of bodily fluids as formative of individual characteristics, temperament, mind and behaviour. It is the use of 'humoured' characters in comedy that results in the eighteenth century association of the word 'humour' with comedy, wit and laughter.

In the assertion that man was a social being, there is a coming together of the ideas of 'nature' and 'culture' (or society) that Romantic thinkers later saw as polarized. Locke's idea of the human being as formed through received impressions also contributed to the Romantic cult of personality. The eighteenth century thus debates endlessly over whether individual character traits are inherent, or formed by education (see 3.2.2) and upbringing, and if inborn, whether or not they are alterable. *Pride and Prejudice* includes a look at both sides of the argument (see 4.4.1) but stops short of attempting a resolution.

4.3 FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Of the many existing models available for the analysis of fictional character, I have chosen E. M. Forster's for a closer look, since he deals specifically with Jane Austen's characters. Do remember however that Forster's analysis falls within a particular kind of literary criticism or way of reading a text and that this is only one among many such possible readings, not all of which even accept the idea that the characters in a fictional text merit this kind of attention. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, provides the terms 'flat' and 'round' as a tool for the analysis of fictional character, using them to describe two different kinds of literary character and two methods of characterization. A flat character is one who does not change in the

course of the fiction where he or she is found and is a 'type' with a few (often only one) prominent features and characteristics. Such characters are usually—though not exclusively — used in caricature where comic effects are desired. A round character is one who changes and develops as the story or play progresses. This classification is useful as a guide to literary intention (to use an outdated phrase). A flat character could be evidence that the novelist is trying to focus on a particular quality or state of mind, while the use of a round character, could indicate an effort to show personal growth (as happens with Elizabeth — contrast her with a relatively 'flat' character like Mary, who does not change in the course of the novel) or show a commitment to realism, in that 'real' people are of course far more 'round' than 'flat'. Forster goes on to specify that none of Jane Austen's characters could really be called flat, since 'she never stooped to caricature'. He goes on to add:

> She is a miniaturist, but never two-dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity. Even Miss Bates has a mind, even Elizabeth Eliot a heart, and Lady Bertram's moral fervour ceases to vex us when we realize this: the desk has suddenly extended and become a little globe. When the novel is closed, Lady Bertram goes back to the flat, it is true; the dominant impression she leaves can be summed up in a formula. But that is not how Jane Austen conceived her, and the freshness of her reappearances are due to this. (Forster, pp 113-14)

This opinion has been contested by critics who see as evidence to the contrary, the very fact that Jane Austen's characters are more or less clearly divided into the morally admirable and the morally reprehensible. They see Lady Bertram as characterized neither by the 'evil' of her sister Mrs. Norris, nor by the virtue of Fanny Price, but simply by indolence and weakness. Kitty would be a comparable example from *Pride and Prejudice*, an easy-going girl, not 'good' as Elizabeth and Jane are, nor 'bad' as Lydia proves to be, if such an oversimplified good/bad opposition is retained for the moment.

Another such opposition that was maintained in the eighteenth century, and even by Romanticism, but that Modernism has sought to do away with, is the dichotomy between 'reason' and 'emotion' which are seen as polarized opposites. However, to strictly locate the **identity** (as distinct from the **behaviour**) of Jane Austen's characters within the terms of this particular opposition would, I think, be a mistake. Though some critics have for example seen Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in these terms (that Jane Austen is here conceiving of two different character types is of course indisputable) it makes more sense to look at the modes of rational or emotional behaviour that each of the characters in the novels exhibits at one time or another. It has been argued that one of the reasons for the success of Jane Austen's characters is that we are not expected, in moving from one character to another, to shift from one level of reality to another. This means that we do not have to judge different characters by different standards of reality and probability. Even a character like Mr. Collins, who is certainly meant to be seen as obnoxious, is psychologically convincing – we are told about his repressive father, and though this does not serve as an excuse for his behaviour, it does provide some kind of explanation for it.

Character in Jane Austen's fiction, is based on the idea of the unified subject, but sees the subject's qualities as revealed in, and constituted by, the particular decisions and actions which he or she undertakes, or as the case may be, fails to undertake.

4.4 THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

I have here listed out for you all the characters who might be considered to come under this category, and offer as a sample of analysis, a consideration of the different

characters in the Bennet family in terms of their role in the text. I have also indicated in bold type the names of those characters whom you might like to analyse in the same way.

The Bennets:
Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, Lydia
The Bingleys:
Bingley, Caroline, Louisa Hurst
The Darcys:
Lady Anne Darcy, **Darcy, Georgiana**
Wickham
Mr. Collins
Lady Catherine and her daughter Anne de Bourgh
The Lucases:
Sir William, Lady Lucas, **Charlotte**, Maria.
Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner
Colonel Fitzwilliam

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are both presented in the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice,* first through direct speech, and then through authorial comment on them and their marriage. The parodic 'truth' of the novel's opening sentence is clearly an article of belief with Mrs. Bennet, who is characterized by her resourceful 'nerves' and "the business of her life" which is to get her daughters married. Mr. Bennet is described as "so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character." (*PP*, 3) The incompatibility of the relationship serves to show up the peculiarities of both – a clear instance of marriage being revelatory of character. The book doesn't just end with marriage, it also begins with the portrayal of a marriage, and if the projected marriages of the couple's five daughters were to take into account the unhappiness of this one, a great deal of the supposedly idealistic picture of marriage as a suitable and desired end is undercut with cynicism. If the choice of a marriage partner is an indication of personality (as it is throughout the novel), then Mr. Bennet is being judged unfavourably for a lack of judgement and "an unaccountable bias in favour of beauty". At the same time, his 'wrong' choice is presented as a mistake that he acknowledges, and his judgement of his children's characters – his preference for Elizabeth and his recognizing Kitty and Lydia as "two of the silliest girls in the country"—is borne out by the novel. Mrs. Bennet, though by far the less disinterested parent, is completely lacking in knowledge of her daughters, as well as in self-knowledge: "When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous."

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet function to bring out the debate over the role of upbringing in character-formation. Of their five daughters, two are shown to have inherited their father's good sense, two to have demonstrably taken after their mother's silliness, and one to have more or less formed herself through pedantry (as opposed to real learning). Considering this, one might conclude right away that people's natures are seen by the novel as inborn and dependent on the natures of their parents, if on anything at all. On the other hand, Mr. Bennet is clearly faulted for not actively intervening in Lydia's development, and Kitty, we are told, improves rapidly once she is away from Lydia's influence. Parental influence on, and responsibility for, people's characters is posited here, and Mr. Bennet is guilty of neglecting his daughters, a failing that Mrs. Bennet cannot be accused of, however harmful her influence. Yet there is no denying that the characters of Elizabeth and Jane are constituted despite (as much as by) their parents, whose failures are somewhat compensated for by the Gardiners in their role as surrogate parents. It seems to me that the novel's stand on the nature/nurture question remains deliberately ambiguous in order to avoid any easy moralising in the form of apportioning 'blame' or 'praise', as well as to limit causality. Such a limiting serves to balance out the emphasis equally between plot development and the outlining of the various characters to the point where the two merge. What do *you* think?

The inescapability of the family is brought out through pairs of characters where the virtues of one are suspiciously close to the vices of the other – Elizabeth's frankness and Lydia's coarseness, Jane's sweetness and Mary's moralism, Darcy's superiority and his aunt's arrogance. Of the five Bennet sisters, Jane is considered the most beautiful. On the surface, rather a bland picture of goodness, she is important because she provides, in her sometimes exasperating refusal to form hasty or condemnatory judgements of people, a standard besides which Elizabeth's propensity to 'prejudice' is shown up. All the same, Jane's over-willingness to believe the best of everyone is **not** held up as ideal – her father says that she (as well as Bingley) is "... so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on", and the extent to which her happiness is in the hands of other people – not just Bingley, but also his sisters and Darcy – as well as her relative quietness, show her to be much less capable of self-defence than Elizabeth is. Jane's chief purpose in the novel seems to be an exemplary one – in a society where she might have chosen to flaunt or to use her beauty more obviously she refrains from doing so – and in providing an additional story-line which contributes to the main one by providing occasions for the main characters (Elizabeth and Darcy) to demonstrate their 'pride' and 'prejudice' as well as their overcoming of these faults.

Most of the important issues in the novel are presented through the figure of Elizabeth and the choices she faces regarding the preservation of the integrity and autonomy of the self, the reliability of attraction at first sight and the right basis for choosing a marriage partner. I shall not here discuss her character in greater detail since this is done later in 4.6, but it is interesting that Jane Austen thought her "as delightful a character as ever appeared in print". If the figure of Elizabeth is used to criticize the conventional attractions that women are made to cultivate, it is equally meant to provide an alternative to them by depicting a woman who is 'delightful' for reasons other than those of beauty alone. That said however, it is important to remember that whatever else Elizabeth might be, she does also remain beautiful, and it is the character of Mary, the third Bennet sister, that shows us a woman who must cope with being unattractive. Mary is described as "the only plain one in the family" and is seen as having to rely on her supposed learning and accomplishments to get attention. I see Mary as being in some ways an extremely problematic character, since she could well be seen as falling within the contemporary stereotype of the 'scholarly' woman who is lacking in feminine charm. What do *you* make of this? On the other hand, Mary could be read as illustrating the limitations of mere bookish knowledge and the danger of becoming pedantic, especially when combined with a lack of enthusiasm for life outside books and an unpleasantly superior and judgemental tone. Listen to her speaking to Lydia:

> Far be it from me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasures. They would doubtless be congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess it would have no charms for *me*. I should infinitely prefer a book. (Ch.39)

Mary also overrates her own talents – witness the scene where she shows off her musical abilities to Elizabeth's embarrassment. Though she appears (to me at any rate) a somewhat 'flat' character, she does serve to bring out the complexity of the ideal of learning and education. These are seen as desirable, but also as possibly resulting in undesirable qualities. The decisive factor would seem to be the way in which learning is pursued, by whom, and above all, to what end.

Catherine (called 'Kitty') is , I think, one of the few failures in character development in the book, since hers is a portrayal that is left underdeveloped and unelaborated. Though two years older than Lydia, she is completely guided by the latter, and we are shown nothing at all of her personality outside the context of her defining trait of extreme impressionability. Lydia is however developed in detail as a character completely incapable of restraint. Yet the portrayal is not entirely negative, and though she is greedy, selfish and manipulative, she is certainly not guilty of marrying

without love, as is Charlotte Lucas. Lydia's faults are obvious ones and dwelt upon by the text at some length, but all the same, I see the fact that she genuinely loves Wickham in her own way (though it is not the best way) as to a large extent meant to redeem her, and show that at least some of her faults are attributable to a faulty upbringing. I do not see her as a completely 'black' picture of vice, and I think Jane Austen steers quite clear of any stereotypical depiction of the 'fallen woman'. Lydia also serves as proof to the contrary, in answering the charge that Jane Austen shows women as unswayed by sexual desire. What do *you* think?

4.5 GENDER AND CHARACTER IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Do the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* conform to any of the various gender-based characteristics that are held to define, and to distinguish between, men's and women's 'natures' in the eighteenth century? Before answering the question, it might be useful to take another look at the rather stereotypical outlines of these 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics. A starting point for this discussion has been presented in 2.3 and in 3.2 above, but a necessary clarification in terminology is needed here. I use the words 'male' and 'female' to refer to biological difference, that is, the condition of belonging to one sex or the other, while 'masculine' and 'feminine' are used in the much wider sense of a set of culturally contingent norms, codes of behaviour, and ways of self-construction that are based upon, but not necessarily synonymous with, the former categories. So 'male' and 'female' here refer to sex, and 'masculine' and 'feminine' to gender. To avoid confusion, please do remember that this usage –and, it might be argued, also this distinction between sex and gender —is a contemporary one, and that Jane Austen does not always use these terms with the same qualifications – for instance, in calling Elizabeth an "elegant female", Mr. Collins is clearly incorporating the connotations of 'feminine' in the word, in that he refers to behaviour that he thinks is in accordance with what society considers appropriate for women.

Women are expected in this society to be (or at least to pretend to be) delicate, helpless and incapable of intellectual activity on the same level as men. Moreover, while ideas of the selfhood, identity and role of men are being continuously revised as a result of political and economic changes and the expansion of empire, womanhood is still defined in terms of the domestic. But Jane Austen does not present any simplistic picture of women as victims (except of the biologically imposed necessity of child-bearing). Rather she even criticizes the way in which women gain control, since they often do so through manipulation, hypocrisy and a rationing of affection. Her heroines are characterized by their **imperfections** rather than their perfections, at least when compared to the conventional heroines of earlier novels, of whom Pamela is the most obvious example.

Darcy expresses the opinion that a woman should strive for more than the conventional accomplishments, and while this view is meant to be a welcome corrective, Elizabeth does point out with irony that his expectations of women are almost as unrealistically demanding as are those of society. Since women are judged in terms of their attractiveness to men, or of the superficial accomplishments they have acquired in order to make themselves thus attractive, and men are equally subject to the standards of public behaviour, the metaphor of **performance** runs through the portrayal both of people's actual behaviour and of the societal norm that they are expected to live up to. It is not necessarily only women who have to 'perform' (though the need to perform is probably more crucial for women). Darcy, for example suffers because of his inability to "play to strangers", while Wickham benefits from his talent for doing just that. Two different kinds of personality, or two aspects of each person's personality – interiority as opposed to a public self—are

being interrogated here, and the public self is in most cases, eventually seen to be more a matter of role than of identity.

Another and perhaps more helpful area to locate the perception of gender difference in this society is in the dichotomy traditionally set up between reason and emotion (see 4.3). This remains crucial to a context where the reading and writing of novels are seen as essentially female (and feminine) activities. If you return for a moment to the discussion in 1.4.5 of the rise of the novel, you will recall the general identification of the novel with 'emotion' rather than 'reason' and the way in which the genre is criticized for its apparent lack of rigorous intellectual activity and learning. It is because of the latter view, and the identification of the fictional with the supposedly 'feminine' subjects of love and marriage, that novels are considered a suitable genre for women. The fictional is often set up in opposition to the 'factual' realm of history (see 6.2 for the relevance of this to women) but also with the emotional, and the domestic sphere to which it is allied. One of the most all pervasive of gender-differentiations has been the idea (not by any means dead today) that women are in some often unspecified way, more 'emotional' and less 'rational' than men. To leave aside for the moment the many and complex value judgements such an idea brings forth, and concentrate on how Jane Austen deals with it, look first at women like Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, who seem to, on the surface of things, embody it. They are however, for all their preoccupation with marriage, more interested in the social trappings that go with it than the emotional life it supposedly rests upon. While the sexual thrill Lydia's feels for Wickham is made clear, she is not shown as having any sort of interiority at all, and this does away with the possibility of showing emotion. On the other hand, if a woman like Jane feels deeply, so does a man like Darcy (both show less than they feel) and 'emotion' cannot really be seen in the novel as in any way a feminine preserve or characteristic. The reason/emotion dualism is itself largely done away with in this book – it is impossible to see either Elizabeth or Darcy in its terms — as compared to *Sense and Sensibility*, though ever there it is present in two women characters instead of in a woman and a man.

Elizabeth Bennett, the main female character in *Pride and Prejudice*, is characterized by wit, independence, and a courageous ability to admit her mistakes. These are, however, generalized qualities present in varying degrees and combinations in almost all of Jane Austen's heroines. It might be helpful therefore to look at some of the common features in the portrayal of these heroines, where the circumstances in which they are placed are shown to be almost as formative of character as the inborn traits they possess. The material circumstances of these heroines vary widely, from the poverty and dependency of Fanny Price to the independence that comes from the possession of a fortune in the case of Emma Woodhouse. But they are equally subject to the conventions that form women's lives – indeed even women's selves—within the society they inhabit.

The fact that all Jane Austen's novels have a strong orientation towards the lives, characters and interests of women inevitably leads to the question as to whether she believed in and is trying to portray an essentially 'feminine' nature, and if so, what this would constitute. I do not think that such an attempt can justifiably be attributed to the very different and sharply individualized characterizations of women, but the idea of there being certain ideal or desirable qualities that all human beings (and not just women) ought to aspire to, does seem to be present in the novels. What is interesting is while these qualities do not have much to do with the virtues conventionally required of women, more often than not they are illustrated through a female character. One such absent convention is the wish that women unequivocally subscribe to the view that marriage is the only and essential fulfillment of their selves. On the face of it, Jane Austen might seem to be upholding this idea since each of her novels ends with the happy marriage of the heroine. But in view of the fact that this marriage is always one entered into out of love, and after the heroine's having rejected other offers irrespective of their material desirability, this could be seen rather as a belief that it is only the **ability** to form a lasting relationship based on

affection for another human being that is being praised and not necessarily the circumstance of having done so. Also consider Emma's clearly expressed disinclination to marry. Secondly this ability is as highly valued a quality in the men in the novels – Mr. Knightley possesses it from the beginning, and Darcy comes to acquire it in the course of the book

Meenakshi Mukherjee (1991) points out that in Elizabeth's refusal of Mr. Collins' proposal, Jane Austen is placing before us a serious confrontation, not only of two different views of marriage, but also of two opposing ways of looking at women. One of these sees the ability to attract men as the defining characteristic of 'femininity', while the other mocks this, and argues instead for women to be seen as rational and autonomous human beings in the same way that men are. This is expressed in Elizabeth's asking Mr. Collins to see her as "a rational creature" instead of as an "elegant female". The ideal of rationality as being constitutive of humanity has already been discussed. What is important here is that the ideal is being extended to include women, to whom it was not usually considered relevant, and the contradictions between the ideal itself and the standards set up for women by society are being exposed. Can you think of other instances from *Pride and Prejudice*, where conventionally emotional and 'irrational' female behaviour is satirized?

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The novel is concerned with the tacitly accepted but not clearly formulated codes which determine people's choices in their interaction with one another. It is collective beliefs and conventions which enable individuals to cast their desires and aspirations in patterns which have gained legitimacy through their continued practise in the community and have been approved by it.

There are gradations in the levels of conformity to standards and norms attained in practise by different characters. When the novel is viewed as a comedy of manners, its characters are not seen as having any existence independent of the community of which they form a part. The subjectivity of the characters and their external behaviour are both seen as an embodiment of the culture created by the community as a whole. While some characters may seem to have come fairly close to an adequate representation of the community's norms, standards and proprieties, others may represent only a partial or even a false or distorted expression of different aspects of the community's culture.

4.7 GLOSSARY

Essentialist Involving, or based on, a belief in essences

Polarized Having been given opposite properties with the maximum differences being highlighted.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the terms 'female' and 'feminine'? Do you find the distinction made here between them a helpful one?

2. Do you think that in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen privileges 'education' or upbringing over 'nature' (or the other way round) as formative of a person's character? Discuss.

4.9 SUGGESTED READING

Mukherjee, Meenakshi — *Women Writers: Jane Austen.* London: Macmillan, 1991.

McMaster, Juliet (Ed.) — *Jane Austen's Achievement.* London: Macmillan, 1976.

UNIT 5 THE NARRATIVE OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Structure

5.0 Objectives
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Narrative Techniques in *Pride and Prejudice*
5.3 Use of Wit and Irony
5.4 Let Us Sum Up
5.5 Glossary
5.6 Questions
5.7 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to examine the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of the various devices used towards the successful portrayal of comedy and the development of irony. This will be discussed using some of the terms, concepts and methods of formalist and structuralist criticism

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Narrative, in its most basic sense, means the telling of a story or the recounting of events in a certain sequence. This working definition itself provides two of the most basic features of any narrative – the sequence of events means that the narrative is located in time, and the 'telling' of the story presupposes the presence of a teller. The story could be fictional, that is to say, 'invented', or it could be factual in the sense of dealing with events which have taken place in the 'real' world. (This division is by no means as unambiguous as it might appear, but even if it is taken as such, it is perfectly possible for the same narrative to combine the two modes, using both by turns). What is essential is that the narrative describes events, and not just things or persons. The two features mentioned above in turn open up several others, since the temporal aspect of narrative means that it has a beginning and an end and that the events are not presented randomly but in an order provided either by the structure of the text or by a plot within it, while the teller – within the narrative or outside it – offers one or more voices and points of view. By 'plot' is meant the order in which the events are presented by the narrative, as distinct from the order in which they take place in the story.

Different genres of writing within which a narrative is to be seen or read, all presuppose different kinds of interpretation. Each of these genres — whether epic, drama, fiction, poetry, or history — implies that certain expectations, ways of reading and interpretations are being indicated and agreed upon by the writer or the speaker and the reader or the listener. These differences could lie in a number of areas, including plot (whether the narrative highlights its presence or tries to hide it) reference to an external system of beliefs, the use of irony, and the treatment of time. One important narrative distinction is the one made by Plato in Book III of *The Republic*, between 'telling' and 'showing' – the terms for these are respectively 'diegesis' ("description of actions by an authorial narrator") and 'mimesis' ("representation of action through the imitated speech of characters"). Drama is pure mimesis, but the epic and the novel combines the two modes. Jane Austen tends toward a dominantly mimetic method, since her stories are unfolded in a series of

scenes, with a minimum of authorial description, and character is revealed through speech more than through authorial comment, though we are given inner knowledge about the character's minds.

The narratives of different kinds of fiction all use invented stories, but their treatment of plot varies widely. Realist fiction, like Austen's, hides plot in the way that historical narrative does, trying to present the events as if they really happened, and in just that sequence, instead of, like some other kinds of fiction, showing up its plot and the constructed nature of the sequence of events. Interestingly, both these effects are commonly achieved (though not of course simultaneously) by the same device — the inclusion of references to dates and times. The correspondence of these dates to 'real' time or events is an issue only in historical fiction.

To consider the treatment of time in narrative, take a look at the following model provided by David Higdon for the analysis of fictional time. According to this schema, time in a narrative could be 'process time' or time that exists to demonstrate a process such as the growth of a hero; 'barrier time' or time that is meaningful only with reference to a particular event, for example the time before and after the murder in a crime story; 'retrospective time' which draws meaning by comparision with past time, one example being the 'happily ever after' of the fairy tale; and polytemporal time which is a combination of all the others. Which of these do you see as used in the novel under consideration? I would see the use of 'barrier time' through the device of the letter Darcy writes Elizabeth, and 'process time', which is the usual time-pattern in the picaresque tradition, as present in demonstrating the growth of both the main characters, but particularly of the heroine. As far as the sequence of events is concerned, Jane Austen's narratives rarely deviate from chronological order. Retrospective accounts and delayed explanations are all incorporated into the time-span of the main action, often in the form of a letter or in dialogue, with no flashback or prolepsis — reality isn't subjective here. The main action of her novels never occupies more than a year, usually less, and illusion is achieved by scenic presentation of experience.

The last feature of narrative dealt with here as an area for the location of differences of genre is whether or not a particular narrative is capable of irony in its *form*, which is the way Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979) describes the reversal called 'peripeteia', or a deviation from the expected course of events, such as the death of Cordelia in *King Lear*. Kermode sees the resultant falsification of expectations and hopes as having the same place and effect in narrative that irony has in rhetoric. I do not see this really taking place in the text we are looking at, where the stress seems to be instead on the expected end working out. However, Elizabeth's reading of Darcy's letter could be seen as a moment of dramatic irony.

5.2 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

David Lodge, in a reading of Jane Austen which draws upon formalist and structuralist criticism, shows how she incorporates elements of the **sentimental novel** and the **comedy of manners** into the method of realism. He goes on to explain the sentimental novel as the didactic, heroine-centered love story, of which Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) is the best example, as well as one of the most influential in initiating a number of sentimental epistolary novels, among them the first version of *Sense and Sensibility* called *Elinor and Marianne*. Lodge also sees Jane Austen's prose as crucial in the replacement of this epistolary technique by different and more flexible methods of representing the characters' thoughts and feelings. Structurally the love story consists of the delayed fulfillment of a desire. This delay doesn't just refer to the heroine's desire, but also the reader's desire to know whether she will get

the man she loves or not. The delay puts the heroine under stress and this generates the "sentiment" i.e. the feelings, anxieties, and moral choices that forms much of the sentimental novel. Lodge also points out that of all Jane Austen's works, *Pride and Prejudice* comes closest to the form of the classic love story, though the required delay is caused by the lovers' mistaken "first impressions", rather than by external obstacles to their marriage. Jane Austen does not use standard plot devices such as confessions, and the discoveries of long-lost children or parents, but all her novels have the basic structure of the didactic love story, with many variations, modifications, and inversions. She does use the theme of surrogate parents (the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*) and, in the story of Lydia and Wickham, there even appears to be something resembling the conventional seduction plot.

Three of the principal sources of interest in narrative are suspense, mystery and irony. The first raises the question what will happen? Mystery raises the question Why did it happen? Irony is created when the reader knows the answers to the questions but the characters do not. All re-readings of novels thus tend to create an effect of irony. In *Pride and Prejudice* the suspense plot is provided by the story of Bingley and Jane. According to Lodge, it is difficult to combine comedy with the sentimental novel, and even when it is done in the manner of Fielding, Sterne and Smollett, the comedy tends to be more in the nature of "comic relief" from the main story, and usually takes a farcical form. Jane Austen's comedy on the other hand, is more theatrical and reminds us of Congreve, Moliere and even Shakespeare, because comedy in her novels is placed within the love story rather than outside it. I am not sure how far this is strictly true – characters like Mr. Collins seem to be among the chief sources of comedy in her fiction.

A feature that is peculiar to written fiction, and is one of the constituents of fictional realism, is a focalizing of the action through an individual viewpoint, the chosen viewpoint in *Pride and Prejudice* being Elizabeth's. Thus the reader is allowed to see Darcy only as she sees him, and is as surprised as she is by the gradual revelation of her misconception of him and thereby creating 'suspense' in the sense described above. Jane Austen is also among the first writers to use "free indirect speech" – reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates to their own 'idiolect'. One of the issues faced by writers of novels in the eighteenth century was as to whether or not their medium could appropriate ordinary speech, and in what ways. Jane Austen uses 'free indirect discourse' (a combination of reported speech and description) towards this end. This is a parodic technique as becomes clear from passages such as this one, describing Lydia's feelings for her husband:

> "He was her dear Wickham on every occasion; no one was to be put in competition with him. He did everything best in the world; and she was sure he would kill more birds on the first of September, than any body else in the country."
>
> (*PP*, 311)

This is one of the techniques of characterization used, since one of the effects of free indirect discourse is the illusion of depth to character. Sometimes only a few key words are used to indicate a particular character's crucial presence in a scene or conversation, and to ally it with the collective opinion, for example the novel's opening sentence shows up not just Mrs. Bennet's ideas about marriage, but society's at large: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (1)

This technique allows the novelist to give the reader greater access to the character's thoughts without entirely giving up control of the discourse to that character as in the epistolary novel. It also allows for variation between the character's and the narrator's values and lets us choose one character over the other – for instance Elizabeth over Jane and Elinor over Marianne. Though Elizabeth is the dominant

centre of interest in *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrative does often move away from her perspective.

Jane Austen doesn't in this text intrude upon the narrative in order to come down on the side of one character or the other, as she does in *Mansfield Park*, where she refers explicitly to "my Fanny". This works so that some events and speeches remain unsatisfactorily explained despite the fact of closure at the end. One example is Darcy's unexplained inclusion of Mr. Bennet in the letter to Elizabeth when he is citing her family's bad behaviour. We see plenty of instances from the behaviour of Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, Kitty and Mary, to prove the charge true of them, but no such evidence appears in the case of Mr. Bennet's. Many passages, including the dialogues between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* could be performed as written and have indeed been effectively dramatized on radio, television and film. Action in these novels is social interaction, and it takes place at balls, dinners, walks, parties, excursions, courtesy calls. Such events or gatherings as these lend themselves to mimetic presentation, with an emphasis on "manners" and conversation.

Fielding, in his Preface to Joseph Andrews, distinguishes between the comic and the tragic "The only source of the true ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation ... Now affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy...." [Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) London: Penguin, 1985, p.28]

Authorial distance is required for irony, and the overturning of expectations for comedy. One might ask here whether the ability to accept contradictions, inconclusiveness and ambiguity is required in comedy or does it lead instead to tolerance that makes satire impossible? Jane Austen never uses a first-person narrative voice, or a dramatized narrator. The ending of the novel is important in giving the *impression* of order and causality, (compare it with the similar ending of *Much Ado about Nothing* where all problems are swept away, at least temporarily, in a wedding dance). The question however remains – is the resolution of narrative an adequate closure of the problems it has presented?

5.5 THE USE OF WIT AND IRONY

Wit, as it was understood in the eighteenth century, fulfilled several purposes, but most importantly, a corrective purpose in the form of satire, though the Restoration drama of the early part of the century had used wit more as a representation of social mores than as a condemnation of them. A distinction can be made between the two kinds of laughter in Jane Austen's novels, depending on wit (which is verbal) or on humour arising from plot and situation. It is on this basis that literary categories such as 'the comedy of humours' or 'the comedy of manners' come to be formed. Wit for Jane Austen, as for her predecessor Congreve, is simultaneously a noun (quality of mind) and an adjective (quality of person). Congreve once defined wit as "at least the sign to good understanding" which shows one of the basic assumptions of English (upper class) society of the time ie, that manners are somehow indicative of morals. This can easily degenerate into a total identification of one with the other, and it is precisely this that Jane Austen satirizes.

Wit, and the witty use of language are understood as a means of attaining some sort of power by characters who would otherwise not have had it. Thus Elizabeth Bennet uses wit to hold her own against Darcy, who has the advantages of superior birth, family and wealth. Wit is also one of the ways Elizabeth manages to retain her self-posession and autonomy in the face of marriage to a social superior. Fear of losing these qualities in marriage (even in a marriage of love and companionship) is seen as a concern that the intelligent woman must face because of the dominant and authoritarian position offered the husband in the institution of marriage by both society and religion. Elizabeth, who also uses wit and irony to deal with the

embarrassments caused by her family, and with difficult situations like her conversation with Lady Catherine, can be seen to have this particular use of wit – as a form of self-defence – in common with earlier intelligent heroines who fear that marriage may end their self possession – the two obvious examples are Beatrice in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, and Mirabell in Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Wit and irony as personal attributes therefore include the ability to use social and linguistic artifice for one's personal ends. But in Mr. Bennet's case irony also becomes escapism and a shrugging off of responsibility, for which he is clearly accountable. He shows detachment to the point of a complete lack of sympathy – Mr. Bennet is delighted when Jane is deserted by Bingley – "Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions." These words are not without some truth, or would not be in the case of a girl like Lydia, but come across as heartless when applied to Jane who really suffers. Irony is thus a gesture towards an illusory freedom. Does Elizabeth give up her characteristic mode of irony by falling in love with and marrying Darcy? Irony is recognized in this reading of the novel as an important feature of its structure. The sharpness of the irony increases or decreases in direct proportion to the distance which separates a particular character from this ideal, and one might argue that the distance doesn't disappear **entirely** even in the character of Elizabeth. Irony is thus present here in the form of a double awareness produced by the reader's simultaneous access to the point of view of the characters and that of the narrator.

Wit also has a corrective purpose, where it is used to criticize, or at least to indicate (often the criticism is implicit in the indication) the problems in social behaviour. Satire bases itself upon this aspect of wit. The eighteenth century, repeatedly referred to as the 'golden age' of satire in English literature – the reason for which, according to Basil Willey, is the prevalence of the belief in 'Nature', and especially in 'Nature and Reason'. Descartes and Locke, two of the most influential thinkers of the time, held man's essential nature to be his rational soul. Following from this, the person who worships reason as closest to nature, reacts most strongly to the evidence of human unreason. The satirist (under which we might include Jane Austen) therefore measures the aberration from the ideal, in contrast to the comedian who is concerned only with aberrations from current social norms. The expression of wit was also influenced by the Augustan desire to define life as they saw it, in language that was elegant, another way of 'following nature'. Jane Austen can be seen as following Pope and Johnson in this respect.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, various political and economic changes and events took place. These led to gradual changes in the philosophy and thought of the time, and though Nature still remained the highest ideal to be followed, it now began to be dissociated from Reason. Greater attention was given to human instincts and emotions or as they were called, human sensibilities. Jane Austen thus contrasts 'sensibility' with 'sense' or reason, the former having a different connotation from that of the modern 'sensible'. Burke, writing at this time, sums up this changing view of nature when he says that politics should take into account "...human nature, of which human reason is but a part, and that by no means the greatest part."

The rise of a new literary genre, the novel, embodied this changed perception, and most of the popular sentimental fiction of this time depicted a heightened sensibility ie heightened morals and emotions, especially the former. Wit, at least as Jane Austen uses it, became both a means of subverting the cult of sensibility, and of offering a corrective, but her work also retains an awareness that laughter is not enough if unaccompanied by the 'good sense' which alone produces true wit.

Peter Conrad sees irony as both method and theme, form and content in the book , since it is used in the evasion of pain as well as in subversion. Irony is the way out for a character who cannot (or chooses not to) show open contempt for society, because it tacitly acknowledges that the survival of social niceties depends on a "contractual

them, a means of attack as well as of self-defense. An example of the latter being Elizabeth's reaction to Darcy's rejection of her at the ball. Conrad also distinguishes between irony and satire on the basis that satire diminishes the characters, and is meant to act as a corrective, while irony shows resignation on the part of the novelist (or the character) who longs for change but knows that it is not going to happen — Mr. Bennet's irony is of this kind. The difference between irony and satire would then appear to be one of the degree of savagery in the attack, and the degree of faith in the efficacy of the attack to bring about change. What do you make of such a differentiation? Do you think it helpful in the study of the text we are looking at?

5.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit examines *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of its narrative elements of plot, story and time, the narrative techniques used, its structure, and the use of wit and irony as both major themes and the method by which the themes are presented. This involves taking into account different kinds of comedy, as well as the ideas of comic fiction in Jane Austen's time. The use of language is extremely important, since wit and irony demand the ability to manipulate language to one's own ends – an ability that Elizabeth uses successfully, and Wickham uses harmfully.

5.7 GLOSSARY

Parodic hat which ridicules through mimicry

Polytemporal Involving the coexistence of, or a combination of, different kinds of time

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Is the narrative method used in *Pride and Prejudice* primarily mimetic or diegetic? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Find at least three instances from the text where one of the characters successfully uses wit in his or her self-defence.

5.9 SUGGESTED READING

Higdon, David Leon *Time and English Fiction.* London: Macmillan, 1977.

Stokes, Myra *The Language of Jane Austen: A Study of Some Aspects of her Vocabulary.* London: Macmillan,, 1991.

Brown, Julia Prewitt *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form.* Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Conrad, Peter "Introduction" to *Pride and Prejudice.* London: Everyman's Library, 1991

UNIT 6 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Structure

6.0 Objectives
6.1 Introduction
6.2 The Feminist Approach
6.3 Postcolonial Readings
6.4 The Marxist Perspective
6.5 Let Us Sum Up
6.6 Glossary
6.7 Questions
6.8 Suggested Reading

6.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to provide an overview of the various approaches to Jane Austen offered by literary criticism and theory, as well as to trace the changing perspectives on her work in recent years. I offer an outline of the varying emphases that have been laid on different aspects of her work by various schools and critics. So while the text under consideration is kept in mind, a great deal of what you read here refers to Jane Austen's other novels as well, some knowledge of which would help your study of *Pride and Prejudice.*

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's work has traditionally been considered an important and formative part of the development of the realist novel – particularly the novel of social and domestic comedy—in England. All the same, there have been (both within this framework and outside it) a number of shifts in opinion regarding the treatment of, and the positions taken on, the acknowledged themes of women, love, money and marriage. In an introduction to a recent anthology, Harish Trivedi provides a useful overview of critical attitudes to Austen , beginning with the comment that the anonym she used ("A Lady") has given rise to mistaken conceptions of her work as 'refined' in a 'feminine' or 'genteel' way , when in fact it is exactly the very same feminine refinements that she comes down upon so heavily. Most of the adverse opinion on her work bases itself chiefly on pointing out what is missing rather than faulting what is present. The uncritical adulation her work received in the nineteenth century is both mocked at and shared by some writers in the early twentieth century – witness Kipling's short story *The Janeites* (1923) in which Jane Austen's admirers form a secret society, and EM Forster's double-edged take on 'the Janeites' – "She is my favourite author! I read and re-read, the mouth open and the mind closed..." – while pretending to be one among them.

The work of D.W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick, in the 1940s and 50s together initiated the overthrow of the traditional view of Jane Austen's work as charmingly ladylike, by setting out to look at the extent to which her use of irony incorporates a strong dislike and contempt not just for the abstraction called 'society' but also for individual foibles. Criticism ever since has focussed on the subversive power of her work, on the way in which it problematizes many of the realities it apparently celebrates (marriage, for example) and, increasingly, on the ways in which her texts are themselves open to readings which problematize them, as well as those that take

into account their historical and philosophical contexts, which areas tend to be ignored in New Critical readings.

6.2 THE FEMINIST APPROACH

Beginning with Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and including the work of Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, feminist readings of Jane Austen cover a field as wide as the many strands and varied concerns of feminist thought itself. Most of these have , however dealt with her views of marriage and treatment of gender. Problem-areas for feminist criticism of Jane Austen have tended to be her ignoring of sexual activity (the stress is on the absence of female sexuality) and the female body, as well as her apparent political conservatism, read as an implicit acceptance of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

As a point of entry into this discussion, please stop for a minute and take another look at the distinction between the terms 'female' and 'feminine' in 4.6. You will remember that the two words were respectively used to refer to a set of biological characteristics, and a set of culturally defined ones. Elaine Showalter, however, offers a completely different usage for these terms in the area of women's writing, in the process also providing a perspective on 'feminism'. She suggests in *A Literature of Their Own* (1982) that the feminine stage of women's writing involves a period when the prevalent, dominant standards and tradition are imitated and internalized. The feminist stage of women's writing involves an emphasis on the rights and values of the minority (women) as well as a valorization of their difference, and the female stage is one of self-discovery and the establishment of a separate and distinct identity. Do *you* see Jane Austen as falling into such a system of classification, and if so, where? Her work has most often been seen as part of the first stage (that of the 'feminine stage') but there are quite a few problems involved in making her fit neatly into such a category. The case made most often for doing so centres on her privileging of the domestic — allied with the feminine — over the 'public' sphere of politics. Jane Austen has been accused of restricting women to domesticity in her fiction because she appears to leave out politics and religion almost completely, and avoids making any direct reference to major historical events like the French Revolution which took place in her lifetime. There is only a small direct reference towards the end of *Pride and Prejudice* to the Napoleonic wars between England and France, even though she could not have been unaware of the importance of these events or of the widespread effect they had in England. Among other things feminism seeks to describe as well as to explain the history of the subordination and marginalization of women and to show that values like 'reason' are not universal ones but those of man at a certain point in history. Even the domestic/private divide is a cultural one. Gender is seen as one strand in the construction of the social identity and also recognized as a performative act. Can we see something of this in Jane Austen's representation of women? Feminist criticism also looks at the ways in which women are stereotyped and constrained by patriarchal society, and asks whether the text is critical of, or complicit with such stereotypes.

Feminist criticism also questions the implicit male bias of historical theory in general which leads to the idea that 'history' only deals with the 'public' area of political conflict or of the market, the conception of the 'heroic' as an inevitably public category, linked to empires and wars, and the notion of progress in history, when it is seen only in such terms. They argue that if history is supposed to demonstrate eternal truths about human nature and conduct, women's history cannot be ignored, since an inclusion of the domestic helps to bring about a different conception of history, widening the scope of the term itself. This kind of history writing offers a different perspective of the aspects of life that are traditionally considered heroic, since war is not always necessarily a noble subject to women, who have to cope with the loss and pain it brings, without being allowed the glory that comes of participating actively on

the battlefield. Women's history also draws parallels between the domestic and the military experience, pointing out how both involve violence, and complex negotiations as part of a struggle for control – something clearly evident in Jane Austen's portrayals of men and women, not only married couples like the Bennets, but also people in love like Elizabeth and Darcy. The area – whether of marriage or of courtship—within which they interact often begins to look like a battlefield.

Is Jane Austen then being evasive or deliberately microcosmic in choosing to ignore the larger political developments of her day? One answer might be available to us if we remember that the polarization of sex roles and identities was actually much less sharp in the Augustan than in the Victorian period, partly because, (as mentioned earlier in 3.2.1) women played a greater part in economic affairs in this period than they did later. The charge of evasion also doesn't take into account the significance that the small details of daily social life acquire in her work, which sees them as an embodiment of the codes, standards and proprieties which the community has evolved for its collective life. A chosen emphasis on the microcosmic could also be one way of interpreting Jane Austen's famous description of her work as "two square inches of ivory".

Austen has been accused of ignoring sexuality especially in the portrayal of women. There may be some truth in this as far as the depiction of sexual acts is concerned (to wish it otherwise is to ignore the social and literary constraints under which these novels were written). But as far as the treatment of women's sexuality is concerned, Lydia is a clear example to the contrary. Even the condemnation of sexuality in some instances (Lydia again for instance) is not in terms of the vice/virtue dichotomy of the Victorian novel (in Dickens' novels for example, the women characters usually fall into the categories of 'angel' or of 'fallen woman') but in terms of irrationality, of a failure of reason and good sense. Though pedantry is seen as the recourse of an unattractive woman (refer to the discussion of Mary's character in 4.4) on the whole a sound education and learning is advocated for women in Austen's novels, and the heroines are all well-read women, there does appear to be a parallel being drawn between education and the acquiring of 'reason'. I would see Jane Austen's endorsement of marriage as a far from unqualified approval of a reality that she does recognize as best guaranteed to ensure security and happiness for women in her world. So while the novels all end in companionate (and happy) marriages, basic inequalities remain unresolved beneath the ideal. Elizabeth for instance will have no money of her own and will be completely dependent on Darcy, and she knows this in jokingly mentioning his "beautiful grounds at Pemberley". Jane Austen was herself dependent on the income from her books to retain any kind of self-sufficiency, so she knew how difficult it could be for an intelligent and independent woman to accept such a situation of dependence.

6.3 POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

Postcolonial criticism and theory deals with, broadly, the social, political, cultural and economic practices which arise in response or in resistance to colonialism and imperialism. It looks at the ways in which different cultures constitute themselves through the projection of 'otherness' (in literature and otherwise), and at the process of canon formation as a denial of the value of the peripheral and the marginal. Postcolonialism sees a connection between the growth of the English novel and that of Empire in that the two are simultaneous and hence inextricably bound up with each other. How much of this applies to Austen ? Empire is certainly not as obvious a concern in her novels as it is in later fiction like that of Kipling and Conrad, but a useful analogy can be drawn with Forster, in whose work (as in Austen's) empire enters the space of the drawing room around which the novel of social comedy is constructed. Empire is here not nearly as peripheral a subject as it might appear, since

it is shown to be one of the factors that constitutes the genteel society being portrayed.

Susan Fraiman traces the picture of Jane Austen's "unworldliness" to scholars who have tended to remove her from her social milieu, looking at her work in isolation as if it had nothing to do with current events. Criticizing as "patronizing" the view that Austen was oblivious to larger events and mass-movements because she chose to concentrate on the local, Fraiman points out that scholars like Q.D Leavis and Claudia Johnson have challenged standard critical editions of Jane Austen's work which ignore her references to slaves and riots, preferring to dwell instead on her descriptions of ballrooms. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) does move away from such readings in stressing the references to Caribbean slavery in *Mansfield Park*, but does hold the view that Jane Austen sees Sir Thomas Bertram's colonial property as necessary to the preservation of the wealth and lifestyle of Mansfield Park. Fraiman locates Said's reading of Austen as "unthinking" in her references to India and to Antigua, in "his overall contention that nineteenth-century European culture, and especially the English novel, unwittingly but systematically helped to gain consent for imperialist policies ... The novels was, Said asserts, one of the primary discourses contributing to a 'consolidated vision', virtually uncontested, of England's righteous imperial prerogative. Austen is no different from Thackeray or Dickens, then, in her implicit loyalty to official Eurocentrism."
(on line essay at http://www2.uchivago.edu/jnl.crit.inq/v21/v21n4.fraiman.html)

She goes on to point out the limitations of Said's argument in that he ignores the fact that *Mansfield Park* is isolated from the rest of Austen's work, and his "disembodied" picture that allows him to ignore Austen's gender in clubbing her together with male writers. For example, Said specifies that Conrad manages an ironic distance in his portrayal of empire because he is not a "wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman", but doesn't seem to see that Austen could hardly have come under this category. While Said rightly points out that Austen's construction of the West as "center, home, and norm" is one of the ways of making colonialism thinkable, he fails to notice how her position as a woman, a spinster, and a writer marginalizes her, and allows her to voice (with irony) the experience of exile from at least some societal norms.

Fraiman's arguments provide an instance of the overlapping of feminist and postcolonial critical concerns, and of the common area that they can jointly address. A look at a critical debate like the one above also ought to give you some idea of the ways in which postcolonial readings look at different aspects of Jane Austen's work by examining the naturalizing of constructed values such as 'civilization' and 'humanity', and paying attention (as she does) to the themes of home, place, belonging and displacement, as formative of individual identity. The individual is seen to appropriate – and be appropriated by – the other in a relationship of power.

Another issue in the postcolonial enterprise is the decentring or the pluralizing of the canon. It is interesting in this context to consider the importance and the perceived relevance of studying Jane Austen in Indian universities, where "English literature" still largely means a canon consisting of British authors. What is the place of Jane Austen in the context of an independent India, or as the question is put in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*, what is Jane Austen doing in Meerut? Does the very fact of choosing Jane Austen for inclusion in syllabi reveal an internalized idea of what the 'canon' ought to consist of? Many Indian students, when reading Austen's novels, draw parallels between her society and theirs, citing as common factors the the rigid class-structure, the restrictions placed upon women, and the emphasis on surface appearances. I'd like you to take a look at this passage from an article by Pankaj Mishra, providing an assessment of contemporary Indian English writing. He is speaking particularly of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy:*

> For all its self-consciously broad canvas—which includes low-caste peasants, the besieged feudal gentry, the flourishing colonial middle class—it sticks close to a basic Jane Austenish dilemma. Who will Lata Mehra marry? ... The adaptation of Jane Austen to upper-caste Indian marriages doesn't work here: Seth lacks her irony, and his characters lack the inner freedom her characters so strikingly possess. In its celebration of Indian middle class life, *A Suitable Boy* expresses the complacent faith in India that R.K. Narayan has been criticized for in the past except that the faith, in this instance, is not Hindu, but an accessory of the nineteenth-century realist tradition: something almost unconsciously inherited from Jane Austen and George Eliot. However Austen and Eliot wrote out of the relative security of their imperial societies; their works express some of the general optimism of the English novel that Henry James rather cattily pointed out, in an essay on Maupassant, was the "optimism of women and spinsters," "of ignorance as well as of delicacy." When encountered in *A Suitable Boy* the same optimism cannot but appear incongruous; and to enter it requires suppressing everything you know about the dereliction of North India.
> (*The New York Review of Books* Volume XLVI, Number 9, May 20, 1999, p.50.)

Though he is supposedly talking about Seth's novel, Mishra lets fall , in the process, a number of preconceptions, both about Jane Austen (notice that he doesn't contradict Henry James' statement) and about her relevance to Indian writing. He sees this relevance as only technical or thematic, i.e. she provides a model (not even always useful) of realist techniques for dealing with the themes of marriage and money, but no more than that. I think both assumptions are questionable, especially the one that supposes Jane Austen's complete adherence to the 'relative security' of her 'imperial society'. One of the directions that our questioning takes is to look instead at how Jane Austen deals with class-structures and identities, as well as at the contrast between the town and the country in her fiction. These concerns therefore form part of the discussion in the next section.

6.4 THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

Marxist criticism focuses on the material conditions in and around the text, which would include the conditions of its production, and the issues of class and labour both as they appear in the text and in its production. Marx sees social being as determining consciousness, and economic conditions as underlying social ones. To read these concerns into any given text, mean asking whether it deals with history and classes as stable or not , whether or not it welcomes change or reveals a 'revolutionary' consciousness'. Such a reading also involves an analysis of the relations of exploitation and domination which, according to Marxist thought, determine the cultural life of all societies, following from the belief that material interests dominate mental systems. Power relations do not function unilaterally, since while an elite (in any society) is formed by them, it also forms the other classes in turn. What makes the process possible is the fact that the norms of the dominant culture slowly become internalized. There are of course within this broad framework many different 'Marxisms', not always in agreement with each other. Traditional Marxist criticism examines how novels get published, how they deal with different classes, and the forms, styles and meanings that emerge in them as products of social, historical and economic conditions. Marxist criticism argues that despite the realist writer's attempt to unify the text, and to erase contradictions, the textual process by its very nature inevitably produces gaps in this apparent 'unity'. This point needs some elaboration — poststructuralist criticism speaks of the "classic realist text" as an instrument of ideology, based on the pretence that bourgeois culture is "natural", and using the dominance of the authorial voice in fiction as a device to limit meaning. Jane Austen has been criticized since she does appear to take for granted the existence of class-

society (though she doesn't necessarily see it as fixed or static). In addition, her fiction appears to subscribe to the Christian-humanist notion of the autonomy and responsibility of the individual self, and certain values are clearly endorsed while others are rejected.

The study of the ideology of gender provides a meeting point between Marxist and Feminist criticism in studying how considerations of gender affect the way in which men and women's writings are read. Marxist readings of fictional texts also require that attention be paid to the role of money in the text, and how the characters' lives are determined by their class and economic status (or the author's life by hers.) In what ways are these concerns relevant to *Pride and Prejudice*? They appear to enter the novel only marginally through the minor characters –servants like Mrs. Hall and governesses like Mrs. Jenkins—who, like the tenant farmers, ostler and bailiff in *Emma*, are present but who rarely (if ever) speak. However Raymond Williams suggests a closer look at the different histories and situations in the novels of families we tend to group together under the category of 'gentry':

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic wars: the real current of history? But history has many currents, and the social history of the landed families, at that time in England, was among the most important. As we sense its real processes, we find that they are quite central and structural in Jane Austen's novels. All that prevents us from realising this is that familiar kind of retrospect, taking in Penshurst and Saxham and Buck's Head and Mansfield Park and Norland and even Poynton, in which all country houses and their families are seen as belonging, effectively, to a single tradition: that of the cultivated rural gentry. The continual making and remaking of these houses and their families is suppressed..., and Jane Austen's world can then be taken for granted, even sometimes patronised as a rural backwater, as if it were a simple 'traditional' setting.... Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is a landowner established for 'many generations,' but his friend Bingley has inherited £100,00 and is looking for an estate to purchase. Sir William Lucas has risen from trade to a knighthood; Mr. Bennett has £2000 a year, but an entailed estate, and has married the daughter of an attorney, whose brother is in trade.... The paradox of Jane Austen is then the achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in the chronicle of confusion and change. (*The Country and the City* (1973) pp 113-5)

Here is an example of Marxist criticism which makes it clear that the realities and nuances of social change and movement are not being ignored at all by the text.

Another way in which these enter Jane Austen's work is in the highlighting of the differences between life in the town and that in the country, and the character's changing attitudes towards both. The country in these novels is not a pastoral idyll, but very definitely has its share of hardship, which is often hinted at even if it is not directly dwelt upon. Neither does Jane Austen adhere to the contemporary stereotype (at least in literature) of country life as harmonious and contented in contrast to the city as deceptive and inhospitable, though she comes close to such a portrayal in *Mansfield Park.*

The word 'country' was also used at the time to refer to county or shire. Recent historians have debated the existence and importance of distinct county communities. Some argue for an awareness of the county as a focus of loyalty among the elite, while others insist that the elite throughout the nation, looked instead to London as the center of a common educational pattern and culture. Here are some examples from *Pride and Prejudice* of instances where the town/country divide comes up in conversation and description. Notice how each passage serves as a comment on the thoughts, values, and the varying degrees of social snobbery of the characters who are speaking or being described:

" 'You have a house in town, I conclude?'
Mr. Darcy bowed.
'I had once some thoughts of fixing in town myself — for I am fond of superior society; but I did not feel quite certain that the air of London would agree with Lady Lucas.' "

"The village of Longbourn was only one mile from Meryton; a most convenient distance for the young ladies, who were usually tempted thither three or four times a week, to pay their duty to their aunt, and to a milliner's shop just over the way. The two youngest of the family, Catherine and Lydia, were particularly frequent in these attentions; their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt."

" 'To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! what could she mean by it? It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum.' "

"Mrs. Bennet, who fancied she had gained a complete victory over him, continued her triumph.

'I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr. Bingley?'

'When I am in the country,' he replied, 'I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either.' "

" 'Do you draw?"
'No, not at all.'
... 'That is very strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity. Your mother should
have taken you to town every spring for the benefit of masters."
'My mother would have had no objection, but my father hates London.' "

"Lady Catherine ... condescended to wait on them at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city."

Despite this mocking of social pretensions, and the fact that Jane Austen makes no direct correlation between material means or possessions and 'gentility' in the sense of superior behaviour or character, there does appear to be a tentative connection being drawn between them. Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, and her listening to Darcy's housekeeper praising him are important factors that go a long way in changing her opinion of him. The importance given to Darcy in the role of employer does mean that such a role (i.e. one of power) is seen as one which reveals true character. Jane Austen might well be criticized for saying implicitly that the role of employer is necessary to Darcy's identity, and above all to revealing his virtue.

Lastly, one can see how Marxist thought feeds into the area of 'cultural studies' by bringing to attention the controlling (and visualizing) of our experience by the media, through the creation of new ways of 'seeing' as well as new images. Cinema and television are of course the most powerful of such media. To digress for a moment consider the 1946 movie version of *Pride and Prejudice*, with Lawrence Olivier and Greer Garson playing Darcy and Elizabeth. The film uses Victorian costume instead of Regency dress, and the shift is a significant one since it plays on the popular

notions of 'Victorianism' in the viewer's minds, highlighting a certain stereotypical 'propriety' and 'prudery' which are actually not particularly relevant to Jane Austen's period. All the same, the impact of the film is such as to leave the viewer (especially the viewer who has not read Jane Austen) with inaccurate impressions of the period in which the book is set. Now to return to an idea mentioned at the beginning of this section, think again of the 'conditions' under which *Pride and Prejudice* was published – its being refused by a publisher in 1797, to be accepted for publication only fifteen years later in 1812— and try to think how far, and in what ways, do realities such as this affect the text?

6.5 LET US SUM UP

Criticism of Jane Austen's work has recently moved from seeing her as an upholder of the 'traditional', to a writer who uses irony to subvert it. Three major strands of criticism are selected for an examination of how their concerns are relevant to a study of Jane Austen. The first of these, **feminist criticism**, involves interrogating the representation of women in the text, and asks whether that representation conforms to the patriarchal norm or not, and if it subverts that norm, in what ways it does so. **Postcolonialism** provides a perspective on the relevance of studying Jane Austen in a context outside the British, as well as looks at the presence (or rather the absence) of imperialism and colonialism in her fiction, asking what are the implications of such authorial choices as the restriction of subject matter. **Marxist thought**, analyses the ideologies inherent in the portrayal of different social classes, and of the nature of social change, in the text, also taking into account the conditions of production of the text.

6.6 GLOSSARY

Patronizing Treatment that is condescending or superior in manner

Tentative Provisional or experimental

Unilaterally Directed towards one side only; not reciprocal

6.7 QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the idea that Jane Austen is dealing with a different, 'microscopic' vision of history?

2. Do you see the study of Jane Austen as relevant in the Indian context, and if so, in what ways?

3. Do you think that Jane Austen unequivocally upholds the division of society into classes?

6.8 SUGGESTED READING

Butler, Marilyn *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, rptd. 1976.

Harish Trivedi (Ed.) *Jane Austen: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1996.